

Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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When most people who study history are asked about the most significant championship in the business in modern times, the answer is usually said to be the NWA world championship, which was considered the premiere title in wrestling almost from its inception in the late 1940s until the destruction of the alliance and growth of WWF in the mid-1980s.

But realistically, from the day Hulk Hogan won the WWF title from the Iron Sheik on January 23, 1984, and Vince McMahon started touring nationally, the WWF belt has been the most significant for at least the majority of the past 19 years. With only one major league company left in the U.S., it is going to stay that way for at least the foreseeable future.

With Wrestlemania upcoming, we're going to take a look at the history of the title, and part one will be the pre-1974 era.

The origination of the World Wide Wrestling Federation heavyweight championship stems back to a crazy period in history in 1962, but really goes back years before that. While the NWA title was never fully recognized world wide and there were always other major promoters recognizing champions, it was unique in that it wasn't a title belt controlled by a promotion. It was voted on by the board of directors and the champion would tour throughout North America, and on occasion take dates overseas, working for dozens of different member promotions. The perennial champion in the early days was Lou Thesz, who the alliance members overall considered the best representation of what they wanted a champion to be. Despite constant problems, as Thesz was as bull-headed as he was skilled, he was never voted out as champion, ultimately walking away in 1957, which started the problems.

Thesz picked uncharismatic Dick Hutton, a three-time NCAA heavyweight champion and 1948 Olympic team member as his successor, against the board of directors' wishes. Thesz believed Hutton to be the best wrestler in the business at the time, and felt that entitled Hutton to follow him as champion. The board had wanted the top draw at the time, Buddy Rogers, who Thesz at the time hated and had refused to put over for most of his career. When Thesz lost to Hutton and started working overseas as International champion, the Alliance started to crumble. Hutton didn't draw, and many of the leading promotions stopped booking him, including the two major markets at the time, New York and Chicago. Hutton lost to Pat O'Connor, who was an excellent worker, a good draw and a top level real wrestler, although not in Hutton's league in the latter. During the O'Connor reign, two major championships sprung up, as Los Angeles created the WWA title, which ended up being even more important because Rikidozan recognized it in Japan in the early 60s, and Minneapolis created the AWA title for home town hero Verne Gagne. There are storylines tracing this back to a Chicago match where Edouard Carpentier actually won the NWA title from Thesz on June 14, 1957. This was scheduled to be a short-term switch, as Thesz had some lucrative bookings overseas, particularly the famous matches with Rikidozan in Japan. The NWA at the time, wasn't looking at the world as a big picture, and didn't realize the money that the belt could make in Japan, so wanted a champion to tour. It turned into a disaster, as they did a

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disputed finisher where Thesz didn't come out for the third fall claiming a back injury. Carpentier was billed as champion and defended it, but the problem with Thesz touring overseas and not providing the alliance promoters with enough dates wound up the same with Carpentier. His promoter, Eddie Quinn of Montreal, wanted Carpentier, his top draw, working the local territory for his big shows every week. Eventually Quinn and the NWA had such a falling out that he quit the alliance, and when Thesz came back, he was simply referred to as champion with the idea the Chicago match was overturned. Carpentier ended up billed as champion, and losing it in places like Los Angeles (to create the WWA), Omaha (to create the AWA) and even Boston (to create a world title in New England).

After the NWA title went to Pat O'Connor, it was set up for him to lose to Rogers on June 30, 1961 at Comiskey Park in Chicago in one of pro wrestling's all-time legendary matches which set the all-time attendance mark at the time of 38,622 fans. Behind the scenes, that result was also an attempt to gain back power in an alliance that was losing members.

During the 50s, several different groups attempted to promote wrestling in Madison Square Garden. Results were a mixed bag, but the few appearances of Thesz as NWA champion were largely not successful. The biggest box office draw was Argentina Rocca, who drew largely from both the Italian and Puerto Rican ethnic bases. After a group headed by Al Haft in Columbus, OH, and Quinn failed at the end of 1955, it wasn't until November 26, 1956 when Washington, DC promoter Vincent James McMahon got Thursday night prime time television, and re-opened with a show on November 26, 1956 headlined by Rocca vs. Dick the Bruiser.

Before long, business was huge behind Rocca, even after a riot on November 19, 1957 caused the New York state athletic commission to ban anyone under the age of 14 from attending MSG shows (a ban that continued until well into the 70s). But wrestling appealed to an older adult crowd in those days, largely a sports audience in an era where there weren't many professional sports. The NWA title didn't figure into the equation, with the ethnics flocking to see Rocca & Miguel Perez as tag team champions vanquish the top heels of the day. The best of those heels was Rogers, who became such a big deal he supplanted Rocca as the big star.

In what was a very controversial decision at the time, and heavily opposed by Thesz (who by this time was in semi-retirement), NWA President Sam Muchnick, the leading power broker in the alliance, got the title put on Rogers. The feeling is this would put McMahon, at the time the strongest promoter in the country because his TV shows taped in Washington, DC aired in both New York and Chicago, and Rogers was packing them in both places, with too much power. But Muchnick felt it was important to get the Alliance champion back featured in New York (O'Connor was already a regular in Chicago).

But the reason putting the belt on Rogers, the country's biggest draw at the time, was so controversial was because Rogers' bookings were going to be at this point controlled by McMahon, which wasn't the case when he was first picked to be champion four years earlier. It didn't take long for the

dissenting promoters fears to become well grounded. NWA promoters around the country were having a hard time getting dates on the champion, since McMahon wanted him in his own territory on a regular basis. Rogers may have been having heart problems at the time, and certainly at some point problems did crop up. The schedule was getting to him and he was refusing to work even the dates McMahon was booking him for. With his declining health and past his prime at 41, the Rogers of the previous decade, considered by most of the era to be the single greatest worker in history up to that point in time, was not the guy who was showing up and doing short matches. The word around wrestling was McMahon was tired of doing business with the rest of the Alliance and was planning on pulling Rogers entirely. Muchnick called Thesz out of retirement with the promise of getting the belt, and also beating Rogers, and sticking it to McMahon, who he didn't care for, and McMahon's partner, Joe "Toots" Mondt, whom he hated.

Things got even weirder. The Rogers-Thesz title change was booked twice in 1962, with Rogers getting injured before each match. The first was when he was running from a dressing room confrontation in Columbus, OH, from noted tough-guy Karl Gotch, and tried to escape, when Gotch's back-up, another rugged tough-guy, Bill Miller, slammed the door, which ended up breaking Rogers' wrist. The second, on November 21, 1962, came in a match in Montreal with Killer Kowalski. Rogers suffered what was said to have been a broken ankle about two minutes into the match, and couldn't continue. The Alliance ruled that since Kowalski had not been approved by the board, they would use the excuse that Kowalski only won one fall, and you needed to win two out of three in those days to take the championship. The injury occurred just before a match in Houston was scheduled where Thesz was to take the title. During the interim, Kowalski took Rogers' dates and was billed as the world title claimant, but Rogers was still the official champion. When Rogers returned, on January 21, 1963 in Madison Square Garden, he beat Kowalski to settle that issue.

Three nights later came the famous showdown in Toronto. Muchnick had by this time tired of Rogers and said that if he didn't drop the title, his \$25,000 bond (which was a ton of money in those days) would be forfeited to charity. Thesz was brought in from the start, partially as a shooter, and the match was made one fall, to make sure problems would be minimized. Rogers genuinely feared Thesz, and would tell the story of the match on January 24, 1963 at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, with Thesz whispering the famous "We can do this the hard way or the easy way" comment. When Rogers was later asked, why didn't he just wait for an opening while they were working and sucker punch Thesz, because so much was at stake and his promoter, McMahon, didn't want him losing, he replied, "Are you nuts?"

McMahon was furious about being outmaneuvered and quit the Alliance, which was expected. Thesz was never a draw in McMahon's key cities, while Rogers was doing strong business. At first, his plan was to pretend the title change never happened. In those days, the major source for fans of wrestling information were the magazines, and McMahon asked the magazines to do him a favor and ignore the Rogers-Thesz match ever took place. Stanley Weston, among others, defied McMahon and reported on it anyway, starting a feud between the two that had its ups and downs for years.

At first McMahon tried to take the tact that since it was a one fall match, the title change shouldn't have been accepted ,

which was funny because McMahon quickly switched to one fall singles main events around that time. Ultimately, McMahon's television simply announced that there was a tournament just held for the new World Wide Wrestling Federation championship held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In this fictitious tournament, Rogers beat Rocca to become the first champion.

In what were politically significant matches over the next few months in Toronto, Thesz did beat Rogers in a two of three fall rematch (although the early fall won by Thesz was via DQ), and also pinned Bruno Sammartino in a one fall match. Both of these matches were set up by Muchnick, figuring they would be important going forward to prove the NWA title was the real deal. Sammartino has sworn when he lost to Thesz on March 14, 1963, the decision hadn't been made for him to get the WWWF title, which others have disputed.

But there is a lot about that time period that is disputed. On May 17, 1963 in Madison Square Garden, Sammartino lifted Rogers up on his shoulders in a backbreaker and Rogers submitted in 48 seconds, thus beginning the legend of both Sammartino and the WWWF title. Rogers always swore he began having heart problems before this match and was dragged out of the hospital to put Sammartino over. A look back at his matches during that time period did show him working mainly tag matches where he barely got in, or very short singles matches. Sammartino has always denied this, citing that most commissions monitored wrestling and the doctors would never let a man with a bad heart get into the ring.

Sammartino and McMahon, while they created the building blocks of the WWWF title together, were never more than business relations, with Sammartino believing McMahon was responsible for sabotaging his career earlier. McMahon overlooked that, feeling Sammartino was the man for the job, and Sammartino's popularity would eventually grow to almost mythical proportions. As far as Rogers went, he worked sparingly after that point.

They were building to a huge stadium rematch with Sammartino. On August 2, 1963, Rogers & Handsome Johnny Barend defeated Sammartino & Bobo Brazil, to set up the rematch of the century, set for Roosevelt Stadium across the Hudson River in New Jersey. But a few weeks before the match, Rogers pulled out, and was replaced by Gorilla Monsoon. Rogers never returned to the Northeast wrestling rings until nearly 20 years later, in his famous role as babyface manager of Jimmy Snuka. Rogers did return to wrestling in 1967 in Detroit and Montreal, but his heart problems never allowed him to campaign full-time until suddenly showing up in Florida during the late 1970s. Real name Herman Rohde, he made headlines nationally when he was 67-years old. He was given a bloody lip from a sucker punch by a 29-year-old man who was 6-2 and 230 pounds. The man was bullying patrons at a restaurant and taunted Rogers as being an old man. The remarkably fit Rogers, who trained and maintained his physique until the last few weeks of his life, got up off the ground and punched out his assailant and sent him running from the place. Rogers passed away in 1992 from a heart attack.

Sammartino was both an Olympic weightlifter and powerlifter, from Pittsburgh, who really grew up in Abruzzi, Italy, where he was billed from in the early years, and was one of the strongest men in the world at the time. While his speaking Italian in his

promos endeared him to that community, his appeal was far from simply ethnic. In a very different way from Hulk Hogan and Ric Flair in a later era, Sammartino became almost a legitimate sports icon to a generation in the Northeast. He became a major name not by winning any match at first, but when they put him in a challenge to see if he could lift Haystacks Calhoun off his feet. Calhoun, who was probably close to 500 pounds at the time (billed always at 601 pounds), did a gimmick where nobody ever got him off his feet. Sammartino did a combination backlift, using his legs, getting Calhoun off the mat. This wasn't Lex Luger slamming Yokozuna, but in mythology, it ended up being much bigger, with people remembering it as a bodyslam, which actually never happened.

While the legend of Sammartino always selling out Madison Square Garden in the 60s is overblown, just as the legend of Hogan in the 80s doing the same is, he was the best drawing card of that era and the biggest star in wrestling of the 60s.

Sammartino and McMahon, as sometimes unwilling partners, practiced a simple booking philosophy. Heels were brought in to feed to Sammartino. A weak heel would get thrashed right away. A better draw would get a disputed decision, often a DQ or count out win the first time, but eventually lose cleanly in the rematch. The biggest stars would get two disputed endings before losing the final bout. This booking became the cornerstone of the WWWF for the next 20 years. It wasn't until Pat Patterson came along during the Bob Backlund reign in 1979, that a challenger ever got four title shots. But over the first few years, Sammartino drew sellouts with Killer Kowalski, Gorilla Monsoon, two with Fred Blassie, Waldo Von Erich, and two with Bill Watts (grudge matches with Watts as Sammartino's best friend, and then turning on him, which became a WWWF stalwart program used to great success for decades, setting up what was billed as "The Most Talked about match in wrestling history"). While other promotions knocked the booking as predictable, it was a style that worked for decades.

Insiders in the 60s still considered Thesz, and later Gene Kiniski, the real champion. As silly as this sounds today, one of the major reasons in 1966 some questioned the choice of Kiniski, a big man who was one of the best workers of the era, is that Sammartino held many wins over him in 1964 and 1965 in the Northeast. While Sammartino was drawing the biggest crowds in the country, the knock was he worked in the largest metropolitan areas so it was easier to draw. McMahon Sr. also ran his biggest cities monthly, as opposed to bi-weekly or weekly as the other promoters with fewer big cities in their circuits felt they needed to do. The other big knock was always that Sammartino only wrestled heels, whereas the other major champions worked against all the top stars to give the belt more credibility.

But before Kiniski won the title, McMahon and Muchnick had serious talks about unifying the two major titles, which would get the Northeast back into the NWA. The idea, inspired by lucrative boxing ventures at the time, was to rent theaters around the country and hold it as the match of the century, the two biggest stars of the era to settle the title, on closed-circuit. The amount of money both men felt they could make on such a promotion with the new technology was probably as important at the time as actually creating one champion. Since Sammartino was considered the better draw, both sides agreed that he would go over. These talks fell apart when neither Thesz, or Sammartino, would cooperate. Sammartino,

who was agreed upon to go over and become the unified champion, was given a schedule that would have him working all over the country with two days off a month, and said no way. At the same time, Thesz, because of his hatred for Mondt and dislike for McMahon, was refusing to do a job for Sammartino for less than \$100,000, a ridiculous amount during that time period.

Sammartino remained King of the Northeast, with regular stops in Madison Square Garden, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Washington, DC, Philadelphia and Providence as well as tons of smaller cities in between. Because of his fondness for Frank Tunney in Toronto, who gave him his first break, he also defended his title regularly in that NWA city. After Boston had died as a market with its own promotion, promoter Abe Ford, seeing Sammartino as a natural with such a large Italian-based community, joined the Sammartino gravy train and WWWF in 1965. Jim Barnett booked Sammartino as champion for a two-week tour of Australia in 1966 for \$15,000 per week, an unheard of figure at the time, and he was box office magic there, bringing him back for a few more weeks later in the year. Sammartino also on occasion defended the title in Puerto Rico.

While Boston in particular was booming and Sammartino always drew well in Pittsburgh (although sellouts were rare) and Philadelphia (which had a smaller arena that was easy to fill before the Spectrum opened), New York started leveling off. Some have said that after Sammartino beat Watts, a powerful 300-pounder, that fans didn't think the next group of challengers could ever beat him. Sammartino drew well with Miller, but not at the sellout level, and was regularly drawing 10,000 to 15,000 in New York, but even the famous March 27, 1967 match with Monsoon didn't sellout. Legend had the two going something like 90 minutes to a draw, but it was actually announced at the time as 39:52, and likely in reality was shorter than that.

He did wrestle a 60:00 draw with Giant Baba on March 2, 1967 in Osaka, but at the time, he, as WWWF champion, was the challenger, as they recognized the International title that Rikidozan won from Thesz as the major title. They had a second, but not nearly as famous, 60:00 draw on August 2, 1968 in Sendai, Japan. He also went to San Francisco on June 15, 1967 to defend against Ray Stevens in a match where Stevens won the third fall via count out, and was announced as the new champion in the building, but of course wasn't recognized anywhere else.

New York bottomed out in 1969. At the time, McMahon had lost television in the market. Many advised him, because of the expense of promoting in New York, and because his other big markets were doing well, to pull out. No doubt the fear of losing the beloved Garden, where he had an exclusive as long as he ran monthly, and which had a great history of drawing the biggest gates in the country on a consistent basis just a few years earlier, led him to continue. Vincent James' father, Jess, had promoted wrestling in the building during an earlier era and had inspired his son, which later followed with his grandson, to hold the building in reverence. With no television, things got as low as a crowd of 5,527 for a June 30, 1969, match with George Steele.

Once they regained television, albeit a late night time slot on a UHF station based in New Jersey that broadcasted almost all the rest of their programming in Spanish, business picked up immediately. Against an unlikely challenger named Crusher Verdu, who never did much anywhere else, but was a thickly

muscled man billed as a wrestler from Spain who had never been knocked off his feet during his career, Sammartino broke all records for the building, which sold out at 20,225 fans, although for years released numbers were inflated up to more than 22,000, and drawing a record \$85,716 gate on June 15, 1970.

Business was booming in 1970, but Sammartino, 35, had physically been worn out by the schedule. He had suffered numerous injuries, but with the company counting on him, he continued to wrestle. The most notable injury was a 1968 back injury which forced him to give up his over the shoulder backbreaker submission finish that had become his trademark. He asked out, wanting to work a more limited schedule, and the wrestling world was stunned on January 18, 1971, when a sellout crowd broke the all-time record for the building once again, paying \$85,554, and saw the referee's hand hit the mat for a three count after Ivan Koloff had delivered a kneedrop off the top rope. It's doubtful anyone in the building that night ever forgot the moment, and in many ways that reaction, dead silence (Sammartino himself thought he shattered an eardrum or something because he couldn't hear anything for a moment). This was followed by cries from women in tears, followed by men in tears when it dawned on them what they had witnessed. This night may have done more for the Sammartino legend than the previous eight years of wins. Certainly that loss wound up as the most memorable moment of his nearly two decades as a headliner in that arena. The decision had been made earlier that night that for security concerns, Koloff was not to be presented the title belt in the ring.

Koloff, real name Jim Parris, was a 30-year-old veteran from Montreal whose career turned around when he started playing an evil Russian. Like Sammartino, he was a short powerlifter, being about 5-9 and about 275 pounds (he dropped considerable weight a few years later). He had gained his first real fame in wrestling one year earlier with a two-match series with Sammartino, the second of which, after they had gotten back television, drew 16,858, the biggest crowd in the building since the famous Monsoon match three years earlier. His career took off nationwide for the next decade because he was the man who pinned Sammartino, and he probably could have drawn huge in the WWWF based on that win for a long time, but that wasn't the way things were planned.

Since Rocca & Perez had been such huge draws, and their television was on a Spanish station, McMahon decided to follow Sammartino with Pedro Morales. Morales, from Culebra, Puerto Rico, was 28 years old and had been wrestling since the age of 16. He had worked years earlier as a prelim wrestler in the Northeast, but became a major star as a top high flier in California in the mid-60s and was on the verge of becoming a legend in his native Puerto Rico. McMahon didn't have much of a lead time as it was the end of 1970 when Sammartino told McMahon he was through. In December of 1970, Morales was introduced on WWWF television as the United States heavyweight champion, having won another of those famous fictitious tournaments.

Three weeks after Sammartino lost, on February 8, 1971 the "Battle of Champions" took place in Madison Square Garden where U.S. champion Morales pinned Koloff. Koloff held Morales in a full nelson, and Morales climbed the buckles and pushed of backwards. It was one of those deals where it appeared both men had their shoulders down, but the building erupted when Morales was announced as winner and new

champion in 10:41. Koloff's win had sent shock waves through wrestling, and this match drew another sellout and an \$86,885 gate. Even with all the heat on him, the decision was made to send Koloff away so all his heat didn't interfere with getting new challengers over, and he went to the AWA where he became a top contender for Verne Gagne. He remained a big star wherever he went for the next two decades, finishing his full-time career with Jim Crockett Promotions with the introduction of supposed nephew Nikita. He still lives in the Carolinas and even came out of retirement to wrestle a few times this year.

The big test was going to be the next month. McMahon hedged his bets, booking Sammartino vs. Geeto Mongol (Tattie Newton) on the same show. Sammartino had left the WWWF and cut his schedule down to only working shows that were short drives from Pittsburgh, which basically became its own local circuit with Sammartino involved in the promotion, so Morales was going to have to sink or swim on his own.

Morales was a huge success in New York, as Puerto Ricans flocked to the Garden every month to see him face a new set of top heels. It was a different formula. The Puerto Rican fans were far wilder and more dangerous than the Italian fans and crossover fans that Sammartino drew. The atmosphere at the matches was far more dangerous. It became a common occurrence for fans to throw batteries and other objects at the heels.

Morales by this time was not a great worker. His high flying days were largely over and his matches usually consisted of him selling for a few minutes, and then coming back with his famed left hook. But the heat in those days was off the charts because of the fervency of Morales' followers.

McMahon changed his formula. Unlike Sammartino, who would lose matches with gimmicked finishes to build for rematches, Morales was almost always to get his hand raised. The fear of a riot if an opponent's hand was raised was too much. In his entire time as champion, including the night he lost the title, no opponent's hand was ever raised over Morales.

When there was a series, the heel would lose because he was bleeding, but still fighting on his feet, thus setting up the famed Texas death match rematches, or on a DQ. Morales' first Madison Square Garden win saw the debuts of two men who would go on to major fame.

Bob Windham was a 6-6 rookie in the AWA after failing in an attempt to make the New York Jets as a football player. As a prelim wrestler, he saw one of the top heels in the Midwest at the time being current WWE road agent Blackjack Lanza, who had a handlebar mustache and a cowboy hat. Windham became Blackjack Mulligan. Even more important than Mulligan, was the debut of Ernie Roth as the Grand Wizard of Wrestling. Roth had been the mouthpiece for The Sheik in Detroit and Toronto, where the pair was on fire and has just been brought in as a full-time manager by McMahon. This became the era of the revolving managers, as each month, either the Wizard, or Lou Albano, would introduce a new heel to be groomed and fed to Morales. Morales and Mulligan broke the gate record with \$88,865. With sellouts monthly, ticket prices were raised and the \$100,000 barrier was broken for the first time in the Northeast on July 24, 1971 when Morales & Gorilla Monsoon challenged for the tag team titles held by Luke Graham & Tarzan Tyler, winning via DQ, and Sammartino returned to face Mulligan (Mulligan had been stabbed and was

seriously injured in a Boston match with Morales, and was in no condition to work, so Sammartino overwhelmed him in 64 seconds). The crowd was another sellout paying \$103,485.

Morales sold out Madison Square Garden regularly during this era. Wrestling was booming nationwide and many territories were going through periods in the early 70s that would, in hindsight, be considered golden years. The Morales formula didn't work as well in the rest of the cities on the circuit as compared with Sammartino. On August 30, 1971, Morales had his first match where his hand wasn't raised alone, as he and Stan Stasiak, a veteran who was originally from Quebec but settled in Oregon, had a match stopped when, for the first time, Morales juiced, as did Stasiak. Ironically this was Morales' weakest house thus far, but the finish and the blood led to another record on October 25, 1971 when they drew another sellout and \$104,456 for a Texas death match which Morales won. That record only lasted weeks, when Fred Blassie, billed as the Pacific Coast champion, drew two more straight sellouts with Morales.

Although long past his athletic prime, as Blassie was 53 by this point, Blassie came in with far more name recognition than any challenger. He had sold out with Sammartino in the early days, but to current fans, Blassie was the top star on another weekly wrestling show that aired in New York, the old Spanish International Networks' broadcasts of wrestling from the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. While Blassie was a babyface on TV, his two appearances in November and December of 1971 turned away more fans than any previous show. The matches had to be kept short because of Blassie's age and physical limitations by that point.

Quietly, McMahon and Muchnick buried the hatchet in 1972. Really, both being politicians with the other promoters, they were probably cordial very shortly after the Rogers-Thesz situation. McMahon regularly attended the NWA Conventions even when he wasn't a member. NWA bylaws stated that a member could recognize no other person other than the NWA champion as "World heavyweight champion." Very quietly, Morales went from being called "World heavyweight champion" to simply WWWF champion. Some thought at the time, since Dory Funk Jr. had become the best drawing NWA champion in a long time and Morales was struggling outside New York and Philadelphia, that McMahon was trying to get Funk Jr. for tapes. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. To the fans in the Northeast, they weren't even aware of the cosmetic change (although the programs sold at the arenas in the late 70s did always list the NWA champ as World heavyweight champion) , as the WWWF champion was the only one they saw until Harley Race showed up as NWA champion in 1980. Even though Sr. never booked the champion, his power and respect as a promoter was such that at one point he was even on the NWA board, which meant he was one of seven people voting on a champion that he never even used.

McMahon messed with the formula only once. In September of 1972, he started tagging Morales & Sammartino on television and it was clear from day one where this was going . Insider fans were clamoring for this dream match that would make sense in any other territory, but went against the grain for McMahon. And it was not without its risks. The fear was that Sammartino, whose reaction when he'd appear in cities like Boston or Philadelphia and at the TV tapings was superior to Morales, would get cheered, since he was the legend, and that wouldn't be good since Morales was the guy the company was in the hands of. The newest *Wrestling Revue* poll based on

legitimate voting listed Sammartino, by far, as the most popular wrestler in the country. Morales placed fifth among the most unpopular (the top two were Sheik, who was in a class by himself, and Koloff, because of all the heat he had even two years later from the Sammartino win). However, whatever boos Morales may have heard at arenas were far drowned out by cheers. Nearly all of the ballots for Morales as least popular, listed Sammartino as most popular. To the older fans, Morales didn't have the charisma or ability as Sammartino, was not fit to replace him, and was resented.

The idea was the two were teaming together to win the tag team titles. In the big match on TV, champs Professor Toru Tanaka & Mr. Fuji each threw salt (a Japanese heel trademark of that era) in Morales and Sammartino's eyes. Both men, unable to see, began swinging wildly, connecting with each other. Suddenly, their eyes were clearing, but surprisingly, they continued the fight until being pulled apart, a shocking scene at the time, since that feud was the match nobody ever thought would happen. Sammartino did an interview, saying he had held off all this time, figuring he would be offered a title shot, and since it never happened, he was asking for it.

"The Wrestling Match of the Century" took place on September 30, 1972 at Shea Stadium. It was a cold and drizzling night, and while not an outright failure, McMahon's hunch proved correct. While fans were claiming they wanted to see this match more than any other, with far more publicity than any match at the Garden in decades, the crowd at Shea was 22,508 paying \$140,923. It barely drew more than what Morales had been drawing at Madison Square Garden in matches with far less hype. And the Blassie matches sold out in advance and turned thousands away at the door. It fell just shy of the all-time gate record set in Los Angeles the year before by Blassie and John Tolos. In another surprise to almost everyone, Sammartino was booed more than Morales. The two went to a 65:05 draw (announced as 75 minutes live), all wrestling on the mat and exchanging holds. It was very different from any main event in the Northeast of its time. Some considered it classic because it was so different. Many others considered it boring.

Morales continued to sellout just about every show in New York, but the other cities started falling, in particular Boston, Washington, DC and Baltimore. Pittsburgh was already out of the loop as it was its own promotion and Morales was rarely brought in, since Sammartino without the belt was a far bigger draw. In September of 1973, McMahon called Sammartino and asked him to come back full-time as champion. Sammartino was 38 and enjoying his schedule. He was working all over the world at this point, making his own schedule and earning top dollar, so he refused. McMahon finally offered him a deal were he would earn six percent of the gate in every city, work only the big money towns shows, and five percent of Madison Square Garden. With that deal, he could work 10 to 15 major cities per month and make \$5,000 to \$10,000 in a good week. The money was more than he was earning in his first run, working less than half as many dates. While the NWA champion (and later Andre the Giant when he became a major attraction) earned in the same range, they were working insane schedules and traveling all over the world to make the same money Sammartino could earn on what was considered at the time a part-time schedule working just the Northeast.

A month later, Sammartino surprisingly started appearing at the TV tapings.

Stasiak returned in the summer of 1973 as the only wrestler besides Sammartino to go to a draw with Morales. While their first match back again didn't sellout, McMahon booked the two to go to a time limit draw, billed at 53:00, although it was really 37:00 on August 27, 1973. Morales pinned Stasiak in the no time limit Texas death match on October 15, 1973, his last sellout as champion, although nobody was aware of it at the time.

By this point Morales' matches with Stasiak and Larry Hennig weren't drawing well outside New York. On November 12, 1973 before Morales' weakest drawing MSG house in 18 months, which was still announced as 16,148, Morales beat Hennig via blood stoppage, his typical first match program to set up a rematch. Later that night, when announcer Bob Freed announced the next show, there was a huge pop, because it was going to be a triple main event, Morales defending against Hennig in a no stopping for blood rematch, the return of Sammartino for the first time since January for a match against Stasiak, and the top feud of the time from Los Angeles was being brought in, with California's top heel, Tolos, making his first appearance in a decade against Victor Rivera, who was very popular in New York before going to California.

In those days, things were kept quiet. On December 1, 1973, at the old Philadelphia Arena, Morales was scheduled for a defense against Stasiak. There was a mind set at the time that the title could only change hands in New York. About 4,500 fans were about to see history, although none of them knew it when they left the building that night. The finish looked familiar to those who remembered the way he won the title nearly three years earlier from Koloff. Stasiak held a full nelson. Morales climbed the turnbuckles in the hold, and kicked off, with both falling backwards. The ref counted three and it appeared Morales retained the title. Neither man's hand was raised, and the ring announcer uttered what most of those fans would remember for years, which at the time they didn't understand, "Let's hear it for a great champion, Pedro Morales." To the end, McMahon feared a riot if someone else's hand was raised. Fans left the building assuming Morales had won the match.

Things in that era usually happened very slowly, but not that week. Fans who knew wrestlers, and there weren't many, heard the scuttlebutt that night after the show that it was a title change. But very few knew until December 4, 1973, when the company taped three weeks of television in Hamburg, PA. Stasiak came out in the first hour of taping, which was to air four days later, wearing the title belt he had won from Morales, as he squashed El Olympico. Although he had been a star in the Pacific Northwest and Texas as a bully heel and master of the heart punch, the 36-year-old Stasiak at the time seemed like an unlikely pick as champion, once again simply being in the right place at the right time. Unlike Koloff, winning the title didn't propel Stasiak's career to any great heights afterwards. Stasiak wrestled through 1982, mainly in Oregon where he was always billed as a former world champion, where he finished his career as a babyface television announcer, and passed away in 1997.

Morales stuck around a few months before leaving for San Francisco, where his status as WWWF king was acknowledged his first week in, and then forgotten. He worked mainly as a mid-carder, and was nowhere near the star he was years before his WWWF run when he and Pepper Gomez headlined the same cities against Ray Stevens & Pat Patterson. For whatever reason, Morales didn't achieve the kind of legendary status that Sammartino had when his first

reign was over. He spent the next several years as a journeyman wrestler on several circuits and a major star in Puerto Rico. After three years of drawing the biggest houses in the world, he didn't even have the success Koloff achieved off his one win over Sammartino, although Koloff being a far superior worker and a Russian heel in the 70s had a lot to do with that. After working for Jim Crockett in prelims, where he was largely a television jobber, Morales was brought back to the WWWF in 1980 as a returning hero, and became one of the first Intercontinental champions. He was around early in the national expansion of WWF under Vince Jr., but by this time was in his early 40s and wrestling mainly in prelim matches before his career ended in Puerto Rico in 1987.

Stasiak appeared in squash matches later on the taping without the belt, so the smarter fans in attendance that night, and at the TV tapings the next night when that same situation was repeated, understood he was a short-term, as in one week, transitional champion. On the broadcast that aired in New York, Vince McMahon Jr. announced the title change, and that Morales vs. Hennig would take place as advertised, but he brought out Sammartino for an interview, and McMahon, who, as funny as this sounds in hindsight, treated an appearance of Sammartino with the reverence of an audience with the Pope, talked with Sammartino about how suddenly his match with Stasiak was for the title.

In a rare break of kayfabe, on December 5, 1973, at the weekly Wednesday night television taping in Los Angeles at the Olympic Auditorium, the show that would air two weeks later in New York, Jimmy Lennon, when doing his weekly plug for Madison Square Garden, announced that on January 14th, wrestling would return, with Sammartino defending his newly won title against Don Leo Jonathan. Still, the communication among wrestling fans was primitive in those days. It isn't as if anyone at MSG actually knew what had been announced in Los Angeles.

Sammartino pinned Stasiak before another sellout crowd, in a rather unremarkable match, in 12:14 after a simple body slam coming off the ropes to win the title a second time. The chants of "Bruno, Bruno" lasted almost as long afterwards as the match itself. Business throughout the Northeast was about to pick up.

MARCH 24, 2003

The 1974-1983 period in World Wide Wrestling Federation history saw three very different, but all successful, champions in Bruno Sammartino, Superstar Billy Graham and Bob Backlund.

It was the period that laid the foundation of the company, and where Vince McMahon Jr. secretly bought out his aging father's stock in the company and prepared to change pro wrestling forever.

But in 1974, it was a different world. The world of sports entertainment in many parts of the country was starting on a tailspin. The 1970-73 period was record-breaking in most parts of the country, and for whatever reason, many areas started weakening as the decade continued. Florida had an amazing hot period behind the babyface sensation of Dusty Rhodes, and Georgia and the Carolinas remained strong through the

decade. But they were the exceptions. The AWA did well, but fell off greatly from its peak period in the early 70s. California started off the decade on fire, and was literally dead by the end of the decade. Stampede Wrestling was about to go out of business until its revival based on pushing smaller talent that did things nobody had ever seen before. Detroit and Toronto were burned to the ground by the fire throwing Sheik. The Amarillo territory was just about dead, and while the rest of Texas was certainly alive and kicking, it was hardly what it was years earlier. It wasn't just wrestling. Roller Derby and Roller Games were on fire throughout the country in 1971-72. And by the end of 1974, it was gone forever on a major league level.

The WWF suffered no such problems in the 70s, which many consider something of a golden era for the company, with many sellouts, legendary feuds, record breaking houses and creation of superstars that would dominate wrestling around the world.

Vince Sr. and Sammartino came up with the formula in the 60s, and with the fear of a riot among Puerto Ricans gone with Pedro Morales working mid-cards before leaving, they had more leeway in booking. It was the standard DQ, blood or count out win or loss early in the program, ending with the Texas death match win. The programs they did in Madison Square Garden, if they worked, were followed on a few weeks to a month delay in the other major markets. Main events were booked about eight months ahead, and rarely changed. The company became stronger than ever for a few reasons. There was more depth of talent, including babyfaces who worked on occasion but not as regulars that proved to be great attractions. Mil Mascaras, whom fans first saw on the Spanish International Network from the Olympic Auditorium was a Hispanic Sammartino, and a movie star in his native Mexico. He was colorful, had a great physique and a unique style that nobody in the Northeast had ever seen. In addition, he was Bill Apter's favorite wrestler, which meant he was featured on magazine covers constantly and made into an even more mythical figure. But there was a downside to him. He hated to sell, which made him largely hated among the wrestlers, and was never asked to lose, because it was well known he wouldn't. Dusty Rhodes came from Florida on occasion and was one of the three biggest drawing cards in the game at the time. Florida wrestling was also on television in New York, and Rhodes was more flashy and flamboyant, having an entirely different type of charisma than Sammartino. And there was always Andre the Giant, who started touring worldwide in 1974, booked by McMahon Sr., which meant he was always around when they needed him.

The other key ingredients in the formula were a few new buildings that opened up. The Capital Centre in Landover, MD, just outside of Washington, DC, became a hotbed for Sammartino. And with the opening of the Spectrum in Philadelphia, they had an 18,000-seat arena to run major shows in a city with a heavy Italian population. And Pittsburgh was his home city, so it was back in the fold, as well as expanding throughout upstate New York as the decade went on, in what used to be the territory run by Pedro Martinez. And none of the other champions ever had close to the drawing power Sammartino had in Boston, so that market was back on fire. New Haven, Providence and Hartford became lucrative markets as well. About the only places Sammartino wasn't drawing were Toronto, and at the newly opened Nassau Coliseum, which didn't do well usually getting the programs that had already been blown off in the Garden.

Sammartino had improved his interviews, which were always great in his role as the humble poor immigrant boy who lived a hard childhood, worked hard, and became a star of the people, but never lost touch with the audience. He was approaching 40, and made some necessary changes. First, he dropped about 40 pounds, to 235 pounds on a 5-10 frame. He was a hard trainer and naturally strong. While no longer among the strongest men in the world after dropping the weight, fans believed in his strength and had no problems seeing him get the better of dramatic tests of strength with huge, powerful men like Graham and one of the legitimately strongest men in the world of the time, former Olympic weightlifter Ken Patera. But with the lower bodyweight, he liked wrestling longer and more grueling matches. Sammartino's offense consisted mostly of punches, kicks and knees, but he made impressive fiery comebacks that people believed in.

By and large, the promotional mechanisms had improved from the 60s and his challengers were better. The two managers, Lou Albano and Ernie "Grand Wizard" Roth, bringing in new talent monthly for runs with Sammartino were joined by one of the greatest drawing heels ever in Fred Blassie. After Blassie turned 55 in 1973, the California State Athletic Commission wouldn't renew his license. While he was still a draw because of his interview ability, he couldn't do much in the ring with so many injuries and age.

Sammartino's first title defense in Madison Square Garden on January 14, 1974, before a crowd that sold out well in advance, saw him pin Don Leo Jonathan, a 6-5, 290-pound giant who was the most agile big man up until that point in time in the history of wrestling. Jonathan amazed Northeast fans by showing moves that even the smaller wrestlers in the territory weren't doing at the time, and became something special, and this was remembered as one of Sammartino's greatest victories.

Blassie left California to work full-time, debuting in January of 1974 with Nikolai Volkoff. Volkoff was the kind of contender they liked, because he was huge, powerful, and had little mobility. In a previous guise as Bepo Mongol, he drew some strong crowds with Sammartino in 1970. But he switched from being a Mongolian to being a Russian, which brought with it more heat. McMahon Sr. renamed him after a mid-level wrestler who worked in Chicago during the 60s (which is why when Volkoff left for the AWA, in deference to that wrestler, they called him Boris Breznikoff). The return of Sammartino to all the major cities packed them in for two sellouts with Volkoff in the Garden and a third in a tag match with Chief Jay Strongbow teaming with Sammartino against Volkoff & Blassie. The year continued with Wizard bringing in Killer Kowalski, another old-time nemesis. An attempt to capitalize on John Tolos' fame on the Los Angeles show didn't pay off as big as they expected because Tolos didn't have the physical size fans were conditioned to seeing in the Bruno vs. monsters programs. A tag program with the Valiant Brothers packed them in, and Sammartino ended his first year on top with a singles program against former NFL player Bobby Duncum.

This set the stage for what would be the biggest program thus far in Sammartino's career, where wrestling got so big the 20,225 seats in Madison Square Garden weren't enough, and if the building would sell out far enough in advance, they would book the Felt Forum, adjacent to MSG, to handle another 4,000.

Spyros Arion from Athens, Greece had come in during the late 60s as Sammartino's sometimes tag team partner. The two even briefly held the old U.S. tag team titles in the WWWF, the forerunner of the later world tag belts. He had then gone to Australia, where he became that country's version of Sammartino as its biggest star for years. But Australian wrestling by this point had hit the skids, and after seven years, he had returned to the Northeast. Arion was brought in as a babyface. A skilled European wrestler who was in a different league than anyone else in the territory. The fans at the time thought Sammartino was God, so it really didn't matter what he could or couldn't do. The WWWF was a monopoly territory and was promoted so well as to make its stars larger than life. The main events were so well promoted that even though the fans could see things in the ring with far more fast paced wrestling on television from Florida and California, just being in the ring with Sammartino at the Garden made most wrestlers into bigger stars in fans' eyes.

But Arion was different. Not since Jonathan had such an impressive wrestler arrived. Arion turned heel on Chief Jay Strongbow. But Sammartino remained neutral until Arion destroyed Sammartino's protege, Larry Zbyszko. Sammartino gave the best interviews of his career, and Arion was so physically impressive that they sold out everywhere for months, the best house show run in company history up until that point in time. It was so hot that for the Texas death match to end things, Arion got his foot on the ropes at the finish, to bring things back in a Greek Death match, the only way to win being by submission, and Sammartino's submission move was retired seven years earlier. But against all odds, Sammartino destroyed Arion and it was off to a new program.

For Waldo Von Erich, they put Sammartino in danger, saying he had a serious arm injury and couldn't wrestle, after Von Erich had won the first match via blood stoppage. Against doctors orders, as the storyline went (Sammartino was actually working a full schedule), Sammartino, holding one arm limp, viciously did nothing but hard stomps and kicks to put him away in 4:12 in a memorable match that further cemented his legend.

After a summer program with George Steele, featuring a horrible 46:11 draw where Steele ran away the entire match to build up a rematch with the obvious ending, came yet another monster feud.

Koloff, who had never appeared in the Northeast after losing to Morales, returned with Albano for a match on October 13, 1975 to start one of the longest sellout streak in MSG history and a new most lucrative period in company history.

Koloff returned, like Sammartino, having dropped about 30 pounds from his heyday, and it was pointed out he had maintained his strength but now had greater stamina than ever. Koloff was one of the best conditioned wrestlers of the era at the time, and a very good worker, which he didn't need to be given the storyline. Nobody in the Northeast had ever seen Sammartino pin Koloff (outside of a March 5, 1971 Texas death match in Pittsburgh when Koloff was brought in just for the bout from the AWA), so they left people waiting. And while the Koloff feud was going on, entering the Northeast proved to be a drawing card of almost equal proportions to Sammartino, in Graham. After having two disputed endings with Koloff, they booked the first cage match in the history of MSG on December 15, 1975. In a bloodbath, Sammartino vanquished Koloff and walked out the door to finally gain revenge on that

night some five years earlier. But earlier on that show, Graham, who had been destroyed job guys on television, debuted at the Garden pinning Sammartino's supposed best friend, Domenic DeNucci, in a record breaking nine seconds. Those two matches went on early in the show, and there was a buzz like almost no other when it was announced that Sammartino vs. Graham would headline on January 12, 1976.

Graham and Koloff were friends from their days as a tag team in the AWA. They were something of a forerunner, and actually a far better drawing version, of the Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura team. Koloff was the workhorse in the ring, but Graham talked the people into the building and flexed on the outside. Also coming in at that time was Ernie Ladd, a 6-9, 315-pound former NFL star, giving the company its best drawing heels in its history. With business booming, the three banded together and went to McMahon Sr., and said that when they were on a card, since they were all main event talent, they should all get main event payoffs or they were leaving. There was too much business to turn down, but perhaps in the end, that may have played a part in history that never happened.

They stretched out programs so well that Koloff didn't even start suffering another clean loss in the other cities until April, when Sammartino beat Koloff in his supposed specialty, by dragging him around the ring in the first ever Russian chain matches in the Northeast.

The cage match with Koloff and first Graham match, with Graham winning via count out, were double sellouts. Sammartino got his win on Graham on February 2, 1976, which came just shy of selling out the Felt Forum with the MSG overflow. Ladd was next on the agenda, followed by a tag match with Sammartino and supposed cousin Tony Parisi over Koloff & Graham for the seventh consecutive sellout in MSG.

The April 26, 1976 show saw the debut of Stan "The Lariat" Hansen from Borger, Texas. The 28-year-old Hansen was not a major star in wrestling at the time. At 6-3 and 327 pounds, far bigger than in later Japanese heyday, with long bleached blond hair and good interview ability, the plan was to make him one. They succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imaginations.

While not selling out the first meeting, which drew 17,493, this became the next of Sammartino's legendary matches. About 8:00 into the match, Hansen bodyslammed Sammartino, but dropped him right on his head. Sammartino's eyes were glazed and he just sold for several minutes. While that was his usual pattern, something was amiss here and many fans recognized it. Still, he regained his composure, bladed himself as scheduled, then made his fiery comeback. Just as Hansen was starting to sell, the ref stopped the match at 15:10 due to Sammartino bleeding, a usual finish to set up a rematch. Sammartino even bounced him around after the match. As it turned out, Sammartino suffered a broken neck from the bodyslam. He was told by his doctor in Pittsburgh to retire. Everything was put on hold.

The broken neck was announced on TV, credited to Hansen's lariat finisher, as opposed to the bodyslam. A simple clothesline became the most devastating move in all of wrestling, and quite frankly, that screwed up bodyslam made Hansen's career. Antonio Inoki brought him into Japan where the legend of breaking Sammartino's neck made him a huge star against Inoki. Inoki even put him over both himself and Andre the Giant. Hansen far eclipsed the likes of Blassie, Lou Thesz and The Destroyer, becoming the biggest foreign star in

the history of that country. It also was one of those stories that cemented Sammartino's legacy. "Remember the night that Sammartino broke his neck halfway through the match. He kept going, and in the end beat Hansen out of the ring." In those days, the idea of that was unheard of.

Hansen vs. Sammartino broke the sellout streak, but because of what happened, Hansen had more heat at that point than any heel probably ever in the Northeast. His matches with Ivan Putski sold out everywhere, and he was kept strong, going over in quick matches. Putski was very limited as a performer, but aside from Sammartino, was the company's most popular regular.

Sammartino vs. Lou Thesz never happened, and it took 11 years, but they finally found an attraction to draw a boxing like closed-circuit gate. Or so they thought.

This was largely Inoki's doing, as he put together a match against Muhammad Ali for Budokan Hall in Tokyo. The battle plan was that the U.S. had the closed-circuit set-ups and fans who were used to it, since all of Ali's biggest matches were held in that format, which made them larger then life.

Ali was the biggest sports star in the world. While Inoki was huge in Japan, he meant nothing in the U.S. The idea was that the promotional rights would be given to the wrestling promoters in each territory, who would push the match on their local television and book shows at their biggest arenas with local stars, plus get two more main events, Ali vs. Inoki from Japan and Andre vs. Chuck Wepner, a well-known boxer, from Shea Stadium. The idea was this promotion would merge the boxing audience, which was huge at the time, to see Ali, and the wrestling fans would come, with the underdog idea, to see Andre win and see a wrestler beat Ali, as on the wrestling TV shows, that was how it was supposed to be built up.

As it turned out, it was a flop. Boxing fans and the legitimate sports media for the most part thought it was a farce once it came out that Inoki was like one of those fake wrestlers you would see on Saturday morning TV. And wrestling fans didn't care about Inoki, who had never been a major star in the U.S. Most of the American promoters didn't really know him, nor did they wanted to promote him heavily and make him a star, because he was never coming back and they had local stars to promote heavily.

Both McMahon Sr., and his son, who had started promoting some arenas and loved a good freak show (one of Vince Jr.'s first major promotions he was involved with was the Evil Knievel Snake River canyon jump a few years earlier), heavily invested in this show. All the big arenas in the Northeast were booked for closed-circuit as well as Shea Stadium for a live show, which was to include Andre the Giant vs. heavyweight boxer Chuck Wepner, with Ali vs. Inoki from Budokan Hall airing on the big screens. And they had sort of lucked into it for their territory with the timing, because Hansen was the hottest heel they'd ever had. The only thing was, for a show this big, he would have to face Sammartino.

By this point, McMahon Sr. had developed a business relationship with Hisashi Shimma and Inoki, sending wrestlers to New Japan Pro Wrestling, in particular Andre. Sammartino and McMahon Sr. were always at odds over Japan. Although Inoki held the NWF title, he also wanted to feature the WWWF title, since his rival, Giant Baba, featured the NWA title.

McMahon Sr. wanted to oblige, but Sammartino, who was legitimately good friends with Baba stemming from their matches in the 60s, refused to work for Inoki. If another wrestler had defied the boss like that, there would have been hell to pay. The fact Sammartino got away with it spoke volumes about how important Sr. felt he was. However, even after a career of being protected, and being rewarded with the best contract in the business, the two ended up on bad terms. After he had retired, Sammartino found out from Angelo Savoldi, who worked in the office for years, after Savoldi had been let go, that he was being cheated on his percentage. State athletic commission records from New York at the time seemed to confirm that Sammartino was always the highest paid guy on the card. Even when Backlund was champion and main evented, if Sammartino appeared, he would get \$6,000 and Backlund would get \$5,000. Sammartino eventually sued McMahon, and shortly after he passed away, McMahon Jr. settled with him out of court. As part of the settlement, McMahon Jr. offered him a well paying job to work 17 days per year as a television announcer. But Sammartino's relationship with Jr. ended up far worse than Sr., and their respective hatred became legendary years later.

Sammartino was laid up completely and couldn't get in shape by that time and didn't want to risk doing it. Whether true or not, McMahon Sr. told him that so much was invested in this, that if it failed, they would go bankrupt and there would be no WWWF that the two had spent the past 13 years building. McMahon by this point was scared about Ali-Inoki because the media was making a joke of it instead of putting it over the way the promoters had expected. They wanted it as the ultimate clash between a world heavyweight champion wrestler and the world heavyweight champion in boxing, a worked version of the original UFC question about what would happen. While that was huge in Japan, where it became a Super Bowl like event, in the U.S., the sportswriters figured, correctly, this was a pro wrestling match and it was beneath Ali and boxing to be involved in it. Most sportswriters of the time figured it was going to be a worked match. Although they were wrong in the end, they were right at the time, since that was the way it was supposed to go down.

Sammartino believed McMahon. For the first time in his career, he went into a ring out of shape.

The Shea Stadium show drew 32,000 fans and more than \$400,000 live, more than double the all-time record gate, and the closed-circuit business was strong in the Northeast. It bombed almost everywhere else. One of the New York papers, in covering the boxer vs. wrestler matches, recognized what the real story was, and headlined it, "They came to see Bruno." Sammartino came in, and Hansen wasn't allowed to get any offense in because they couldn't risk Sammartino taking any moves. He brawled and Hansen ran, eventually walking away for a count out, setting up the cage match seven weeks later where he gained his full vengeance. Sammartino had saved the show both at the gate, and the show itself, since from an American perspective, Ali vs. Inoki was 15 rounds where little happened, a disaster from every standpoint. A generation later, the match, which was supposed to be a work and ended up as a strange shoot because Ali in the last days before the show decided against working the match, would become legendary as almost the birth of MMA and some rank it as the most important match in the history of Japanese pro wrestling.

Due to the injury, Sammartino cut way back on his schedule and once again told McMahon he didn't want to fulfill even the

limited scheduling demands he had as champion. McMahon asked him to stay until they could find a replacement and properly build him up.

After beating Hansen, yet another superstar was created on September 4, 1976 when Sammartino opposed a 320-pound steroided up caveman looking guy with agility and athletic ability like Jonathan, that McMahon Sr. named Bruiser Frank Brody. Frank Goodish got over in Florida, where he was seen by Kowalski, who knew they loved big powerful looking guys in New York. The name stuck world wide. He and Hansen had first become friends in Louisiana when both were starting out in 1974, became a legendary tag team in Japan, where he eventually surpassed Hansen's popularity before he was stabbed to death in 1988. But these were not classic matches. Sammartino was not fully recovered, and Brody, while at the peak of his athletic ability, was still a little green in the ring. While nobody was aware anything was happening, McMahon made his decision at that time about his company's future.

Bob Backlund was the 1971 NCAA Division II national wrestling champion at 190 pounds, wrestling for North Dakota State University, where he was also a star football player. He also got through college even though he couldn't read or write, which was largely kept secretive. He came from a small town, Princeton, MN, and after college, played some semi-pro football before getting trained in Minneapolis for pro wrestling. He got his first push in Amarillo, where they loved to push real wrestlers. At 6-1 and 235 pounds, and a heavy lifter himself, the 27-year-old Backlund had one of the best physiques in wrestling at the time. He looked much younger than he was, was deceptively powerful and well conditioned, although not a good worker. His credentials helped him because he came into wrestling during the heyday of Jack Brisco, and he was the closest thing wrestling had to a follow-up version, because at the time there was a major stigma regarding amateur wrestlers going pro, as if it was the ultimate selling out of their sport. His strength allowed him to lift larger men up with ease. He once did a one-armed Gotch lift with a young Hulk Hogan in Philadelphia and Boston, who weighed 310 at the time. He used the old atomic drop as his finisher, but instead of just picking someone a little off the ground and dropping their butt on his knee, Backlund would lift the guy up way overhead, hold him there, and run across the ring while slamming him down on his knee.

When Sammartino asked out after the broken neck, McMahon Sr. went to Sam Muchnick. McMahon Sr. had gone through the ethnic ranks for decades and wanted an All-American boy type, which he thought would have more appeal, based on Brisco. Brisco was a former NCAA champion who had turned into, along with Sammartino, the biggest star in wrestling a few years earlier as NWA world champion. Brisco himself had burned out bad on the schedule as champion and McMahon was looking for someone younger. Backlund was headlining St. Louis at the time and Muchnick saw a possible future NWA champion in him, so pushed him to the top with main events against people like former champs Gene Kiniski and Harley Race immediately. He showed good babyface charisma, was impressive physically, and they loved having a champion who was a real top-flight wrestler for the credibility aspect. Even so, when McMahon asked, Muchnick told him Backlund was the guy he wanted. After checking with Eddie Graham, he agreed. But the feeling among all three is that it wouldn't be effective for Backlund to show up, like Morales did, and immediately get the title. He wasn't the type to get over instantly to the degree necessary to be world champion. If they did the usual quickie

switch, he'd be compared with Sammartino and be resented by fans, which hurt Morales everywhere but New York. McMahon Sr., perhaps discussing things with his son, chose Graham as the interim champion. His son was far more into the show than the wrestling, and Graham was his favorite performer.

At the time, Graham was wrestling in Florida, and every Tuesday in the second row, a tall guitar player named Terry Bollea was in the second row, also idolizing him. Graham was told by promoter Eddie Graham that McMahon Sr. wanted to meet with him and was going to offer him the title. Eddie also told him to schedule the meeting immediately, because it was the break of a lifetime, and it would be foolish to risk giving him time to change his mind.

At McMahon Sr.'s home in Fort Lauderdale, he told Graham the entire scenario. This was October of 1976. He told him he wanted him back in the territory for TV in early March, and he'd start full-time in April, and get the title at the end of the month. He told him he'd lose it on February 20, 1978 in Madison Square Garden to Backlund. Backlund at the time held the Missouri State title, beating Race for it, and had a week earlier wrestled Terry Funk in an NWA title match where they went 60:00 with Funk winning the only fall. Nevertheless, their paths had never crossed and wrestling had little communication. Graham was thrilled at the opportunity, amazed at how planned out everything was, and shocked when told about Backlund, because he had never even heard of him. Backlund debuted on TV at about the same time, and on November 26, 1976, dropped the Missouri title to Brisco.

But the business kept going, with Sammartino having a long run with former champ Stasiak, returning for the first time since losing the title, capped off with Sammartino winning the first ever Sicilian Stretcher match in MSG on December 20, 1976.

The next program was a biggie, with Patera. That psychology worked, because people believed Sammartino was as strong as any man alive, but Patera had become a mainstream sports star on ABC's Wide World of Sports years earlier as the first American to lift 500 pounds over his head. When the rotund Vassily Alekseyev was a world wide sports name as the 340-pound Russian with the enormous gut that broke the 500-pound clean and jerk barrier in 1970. Patera was the great American hope in the 1972 Olympics and it was the most publicized weightlifting showdown in history. He ended up bombing out in the Olympics, but every sports fan knew him and he became a top pro wrestling attraction from his debut. The first match, on January 17, 1977, saw Patera win via count out, and it came on the night of a huge blizzard. Even though they only drew about 16,000 fans, it was considered amazing because the weather was such that nobody was expecting anyone to make it.

They actually did the unthinkable in the rematch, as in the death match on February 7, 1977, for the first time in history, they screwed the fans with no winner as the referee was knocked out. They were clearly hedging their bets and considering Patera to be the next champion, as Sammartino never scored a pinfall on Patera anywhere in the Northeast.

The title switch was set for April 30, 1977 at the Baltimore Civic Center. It was the biggest night of Graham's career, but instead of being excited about becoming the first heel who would get to be a true champion as opposed to a few week transitional guy and make the most money of his career, or the hot sellout crowd of 12,000 fans, he was scared to death. The

title win in his mind on that was secondary to the reaction of the people when they realized he had pinned Sammartino. His goal wasn't to have a good match. It was figuring how to escape from the ring after being presented with the belt, without getting stabbed. It was worse when he heard the finish. He was to pin Sammartino using the ropes for leverage. While a great storyline to build for a rematch, that only made the night even more dangerous. He was not just going to shock those fans, seeing something they never expected they would see, but doing it in a manner that was only going to make the fans madder. Graham's memories of the night focus more on his fears. He was to, after winning the match, grab the belt from the referee so the ringside photographers could get shots of it, and then leave. With minimal security and an outraged crowd running over the ropes that were supposed to keep the crowd from blocking the aisle, Graham ran into the mass of humanity, swinging the belt wildly for protection. He was doused with cokes, beer, and worse, urine, punched and kicked full force by people while taking every step, but made it to the back without being stabbed or seriously hurt. When the night was over, Graham was thankful, not that he was about to have a run as champion like no heel in wrestling had, but because he was still alive after his first night with the belt.

The rematch, on June 27, 1977 in Madison Square Garden, which ended with both men disqualified, is remembered by Garden regulars as the single most heated match in the history of the building. Graham himself considered it his most memorable night of his career. The heat was such that he and Sammartino had to yell in the ring their spots, and nobody could hear them.

Graham, real name Eldridge Wayne Coleman, was 33 years old at the time. He was Hulk Hogan before there was a Hulk Hogan. While far from the first wrestler to use steroids, as by this point, all the big powerhouse guys probably besides Sammartino were using them, Graham took them to a new level, and paid a horrible price for it later in life. He had neither the top of the line physique or was the strongest man in the world, but he probably was at close to both as nearly anyone. In 1972, Graham did a 585 pound bench press with a two second pause at Gold's Gym in Venice Beach, CA while being spotted by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Franco Columbu. A few years earlier, in Stu Hart's garage, after driving four days from Phoenix to Calgary and in below zero weather, he impressed a fawning Hart by bench pressing 600 pounds in a looser style. The world record at the time was 617. Sammartino had done 565, but realistically that was far more impressive because it was drug free. Graham also placed fifth in a Pro Mr. America contest shortly before entering the WWF. His arms were freakishly large for that era, and even today, with all the new drugs, better supplements, smarter eating and a business where physiques are far more important, Graham would be one of the few guys of that era who would rival the look of nearly anyone in the business, and talk better than almost any main eventer. He was 6-4, weighing about 265 pounds. There had never been a guy of his size with the muscularity of Graham, who was the workout partner of Schwarzenegger as he prepared for his 1972 Mr. Olympia win. As for his wrestling, well, he had two of the three key elements and in those days, that was enough to make him the best heel draw of the decade besides The Sheik. He was coming off a multi-year AWA run where he drew big crowds with the likes of Wahoo McDaniel, The Crusher, Patera, Verne Gagne, Ivan Putski and others.

This was supposed to simply be a transition year and Graham was to bide time until Backlund, being brought along slowly so that the fans wanted him as champion before they pulled the trigger, was ready. A heel champ broke the formula of the babyfaces eventually always emerging triumphant and people leaving the show with their hero's honor always in tact. Nobody at the time thought there was a better formula. What made this reign was that Northeast fans had so many babyfaces who had never received title shots, and most had been protected so fans had rarely if ever seen them lose. Graham sold out all over the Northeast, not just against Sammartino, but also against Rhodes, Mascaras, Chief Jay Strongbow, Gorilla Monsoon, Andre, and Putski. He wrestled ten Madison Square Garden shows as champion. Only one show didn't sellout, a match with Peter Maivia that drew 17,914. Seven of them, two each with Sammartino, Rhodes and Mascaras and one with Backlund drew double sellouts, making it a more lucrative run than even Sammartino's peak period as champion. Even more notable is that by this time, and it actually dated back to the Sammartino reign, the MSG shows aired live on cable in New York, and eventually nationwide, on the MSG Network, yet they were still able to get 4,500 fans for the big shows to pay to watch closed-circuit. Graham drew well, with the face opponents all talking about how they had waited years for their shot at the title, including setting all-time gate records for rematches with Sammartino in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston.

Probably the most notable matches were at the end of his reign. On January 23, 1978 in Madison Square Garden, in what was to be his final title defense in the building, he was supposed to pin Mascaras. Mascaras, who had never done a job in WWWF rings after becoming the first man who was allowed to wrestle in a mask in New York State in decades due to a commission ruling, refused to allow Graham to win, and didn't even want to sell. They had a bad match, both being in horrible moods, with Mascaras accepting a DQ loss as the finish. Two days later, in what was billed as the "Super Bowl of Wrestling," was the first time the NWA champion, at the time Race, and WWWF champion, had ever faced off. It was at the Orange Bowl in Miami for Championship Wrestling from Florida. The gimmick was that the Orange Bowl had housed several NFL Super Bowl games, so that was the hook for the site of what was billed as the biggest match in the history of wrestling. But an outdoor show in the rain drew a disappointing crowd of 12,000 fans, and they went to a 60:00 draw with each taking one fall. Eddie Graham and McMahon agreed on going the time limit as the finish when the match was set up months earlier, not counting on the weather situation, and apparently having so much confidence in Race as a worker that he could carry Graham for that long. Even though Race was a great worker, the ring being covered in water so the two were slipping all over the ring, combined with Graham's limitations in what was probably the only 60:00 match of his career, made this a huge disappointment.

On the other hand, there was February 18, 1978 at the Spectrum. It was a cage match with Sammartino, which drew what was, and may still be, the largest crowd for any event in the building. Even when wrestling was packing them in, the news media never covered it because it was wrestling. But the 6 p.m. news before the show noted that there was a crowd estimated of 5,000 people who had already been turned away because the show was sold out. By the end of the night, the police estimates were that 8,000 fans had been turned away at the door. Sammartino had been in more than his share of huge events, but when he came to the building and saw what was

happening, he was blown away. He then talked to Graham, and found out he was losing the title to Backlund two days later. He was stunned. He'd been thorough all the ups and downs of business, and while he didn't want the belt back, as he was happy with his schedule of wrestling three to five times per month and was planning to cut back even farther, he thought you don't mess with this level of interest. He saw himself chasing the title as the biggest thing he'd ever been involved in. He thought it was nuts that this was going to be it.

The program worked because nobody could perceive of a way that Graham could win. Sammartino's first match in Philadelphia was on December 29, 1959, and in more than 18 years, had never suffered a clean loss in that city. Graham had never pinned Sammartino after the title win using the ropes. They had two title rematches at the Spectrum which both sold out. In the first, on September 17, 1977, Graham was bloodied badly and the match was stopped, so he was able to keep his title on the TKO. On December 10, 1977, in a no stopping for blood rematch, Sammartino again destroyed Graham at the end, but Graham was counted out of the ring rather than pinned, to logically set up the final conflict in a cage. Sammartino always destroyed everyone in cage matches. There had never been a cage match up to that point in WWWF history without a clear and decisive winner, always the babyface. Until that night.

Graham was in a bad mood, despite the electricity of the night. The first few months he had the title, he was happy he got picked. But after that honeymoon period, there was a realization he was doing huge business, but it didn't matter, because the clock was ticking. At the same time, the fans started turning him babyface in a similar fashion to Steve Austin in late 1996 and early 1997. Fans were different in those days, and it was rare for all but a few fans to cheer heels. Graham was getting 40% cheers against anyone except Sammartino, against who barely anyone would cheer him. Fans would make signs for him, something that wasn't done at the time for anyone else. He knew McMahon's formula was for the babyface superhero, and he believed it should be him. He started being less heelish and more comical on his promos, and wouldn't discourage fans from cheering him. But the plan never changed and his reign, and the money that went with it, was in its last 50 hours.

Sammartino had a plan. There were always those who alleged that Buddy Rogers never really broke his ankle in the match with Killer Kowalski, and it was simply a way to avoid the match booked with Lou Thesz that week. It allowed him to miss the match, although ultimately things ended up as planned. Sammartino probably did believe that the Rogers heart attack story was an excuse for him not to drop the title to him in 1963, whether true or not. In 1973, Dory Funk claimed a ranch accident and a shoulder separation a few days before he was scheduled to drop the NWA title to Jack Brisco on March 2 in Houston. He was out of action for two months, which bought time to get the board to change its mind, although, ultimately, the beneficiary of that was Race, who got the title as a shooter from Funk to pass to Brisco about a week after Funk returned.

Sammartino suggested a spot where Graham would go for a flying knee, and he'd go down, and make it look like a screwed up spot. Graham's knee would crash into the cage. Sammartino would kick the knee once, Graham would buzz him and the ref in wrestler code that it was hurt. Graham would limp around, and Sammartino would never touch the knee, mainly kicking him in the head. The idea was to work the

wrestlers and the office as opposed to the fans. Graham would juice early. They'd go to the finish early, with the idea that Graham was really hurt and they were rushing the match.

And that's what happened. At the 7:43 mark, the door was accidentally opened. Sammartino, who didn't have a scratch, pounded a bloodied Graham, who fell through the door for the fluke win. The show drew the largest gate for a wrestling show in the Northeast in history outside of the New York market. Sammartino would never challenge for the title again.

Backlund had by this point a one year long major television push, starting at about the same time Graham returned. It was evident from week one he was the guy being groomed for the title, but he was largely kept away from the big arenas except for quick squashes and portrayed on television as a young man with a skill level that nobody in wrestling could touch. Backlund had moved to the Florida territory, which gave him more exposure in New York, and flew into the East Coast just for TV tapings and rare major arena dates, where his very appearance on the shows was treated as a big deal. The plan nearly unraveled, as when Backlund was set to leave the Florida territory, they had him do a clean job to Bob Orton Jr. on television, which aired in New York, no doubt making a lot of people furious.

In the entire build-up period, he only worked three times in Madison Square Garden, a semifinal win over Executioner #2 (Big John Studd under a mask) and a heavily pushed squash win over Larry Sharpe on one of the Graham-Rhodes shows. His final exposure was on January 23, 1978—just before he was getting the title shot. Backlund was booked in the semi-main, underneath Graham vs. Mascaras, teaming with Maivia & Zbyszko & Tony Garea in an elimination match with veteran heels Toru Tanaka & Mr. Fuji (the multi-time tag champs) & Stasiak & Baron Mikel Scicluna. Before Backlund could even tag in, the heels won three straight falls, leaving him alone. He then won four-straight falls, ending by pinning former champion Stasiak. Surprising a lot of people, who with the DQ finish, expected a Texas death match the next month between Graham and Mascaras, Howard Finkel announced the main event on the next show as Graham defending against Backlund. Virtually everyone in the know at the time recognized this was the title switch.

Graham showed up at the Garden, limping badly, and working everyone. He saw Vince Sr., and told him he'd blown out his knee at the Spectrum and didn't think he could wrestle. Unfazed, and probably not believing it, Sr. told him he could do a short match but he was going to drop the title. Sr. told Gorilla Monsoon about the problem, and Monsoon wrapped Graham's uninjured knee so tight that Graham could barely move his leg. Sr. then told Backlund, the first thing I want you to do is attack his knee. If Graham was going to sell the knee, it was Backlund who was going to have hurt him. He didn't want anyone thinking Backlund got the title on a fluke because Graham came in damaged.

Graham got into the ring and tried to limp, but Backlund was all over his knee. By this point, he knew there was no point to it. And there was no point in doing a short match. Billed as "Everyone's All-American Boy," Backlund picked Graham up and delivered his atomic drop. Graham got his foot on the ropes but the three count was tolled at 14:51. The finish at the time was considered poetic justice because he screwed Sammartino in similar fashion, and because it set up a reason for lucrative rematches everywhere. Their MSG rematch was a

near double sellout, and on April 24, 1978, Backlund cleanly beat Graham in a cage match, before yet another double sellout.

The new era had begun. This was a totally different situation. Historically, the babyface real wrestler was not a success in the Northeast, as evidenced by Thesz and Verne Gagne a generation earlier. Main events were historically big, slow guys, doing power moves and brawling, without a ton of wrestling thrown in. Backlund wasn't big, but he did look as athletic as anyone. He was a terrible brawler and although his rep and hype said otherwise, also wasn't much of a technical wrestler. But he had great stamina, strong charisma, at least in the early years (although nowhere near the level of either Sammartino or Graham), and most importantly, the people believed in him. He was also able to be carried by most good workers, and with his stamina, could have great matches. But when in with a mediocre or big, slow worker of the likes that were fed to Morales and Sammartino, it was bad news. Unlike Morales, with the fervent Puerto Rican audience, Sammartino, whose aura was such that people would accept anything he touched as being great, and Graham, who was larger than life, when Backlund had bad matches, his charisma wasn't enough to overcome them. With some notable exceptions, they played to his strengths, feeding him a diet of some of the best workers of the era.

Not that there weren't trying moments from the start. Backlund, raised in a small town, and even after five years in wrestling, was at the core still a naive country boy. On March 20, 1978, in his first title defense at the Garden against Graham, he was wearing his long black boxer style robe with the belt underneath. McMahon Sr., who regarded the belt itself as both the company's symbol, and the money, and regarded MSG with reverence, tried to explain to Backlund not to go to the ring that way. "Bobby, you've got to show the belt. You can't go out there with a black robe covering the belt. Bobby, this is the Garden and this is the belt." Backlund looked right at him, not getting it at all, and said, "But I like my robe." Vince Sr. didn't say anything, and the usually poker faced man got this look on his face, usually reserved for when Lou Albano would be drunk and do something stupid, that seemed to say, "What have I just done?"

Backlund ended up on top for six years, and business was very good the entire time. He sold out 39 out of his 60 title defenses (of the formula babyface champs, the most successful in the history of the building was Morales, who sold out 23 of his 29 title defenses). Backlund's 41 total main event sellouts in the building ranked with Sammartino, who worked nearly double as many main events, as the most in history.

With a babyface champion, McMahon Sr. went right back to the formula. After beating Graham in the cage match, it was time to put wings on Backlund and establish him as a real champion. They first put him with Patera, whom Sammartino had never beaten cleanly, and Backlund pinned him first time out. Next came Arion, who had the legendary series with Sammartino, and Backlund beat him first time out. Then it was summer and George Steele, who was another quick win. Then came two other familiar faces, Koloff and Ladd. But Backlund also feared a double-cross from the start. Once, in Philadelphia against Graham, Graham came up with a spot where he pinned Backlund and told him to put his foot over the ropes. The ref counted three, and Backlund was furious. Graham had set the spot up with the ref, but somehow Backlund didn't know. The ref raised Graham's hand, but as was the plan, he

found out about the leg on the ropes and ordered the match to continue. Backlund was furious in the dressing room, thinking they were trying to steal the belt from him, and for a while, was refusing to allow wrestlers to get near falls on him.

Backlund's first big-time program came as he started to form a TV tag team with Maivia. Like with Watts and Sammartino, Sammartino and Morales and to a lesser degree, Arion and Sammartino, they did the simple turn as Backlund had his supposed best friend turn on him, and then demand a title match. Maivia had a bunch of DQ finishes before losing the cage match at the end. While they drew well, the matches with Steele, Ladd and Maivia were bad. All were long past their prime, and Backlund couldn't carry a match.

A new type of contender and type of title match was initiated under Backlund. Generally speaking, the heel opponents were smaller, usually in the 240 to 250 pound range, and much better workers than the monsters that were lined up for Sammartino and Morales. One of his best opponents who fit that mold was second generation star Greg Valentine. Backlund and Valentine on February 19, 1979 went 54:00 to an announced 60:00 draw. Valentine was a great worker in those days and the two clicked as opponents. Backlund followed beating Valentine in 31:00, with a quick win over another veteran from a different era, Bulldog Brower, which underscored everything learned from the previous programs with past their prime guys. He then had a classic win over The Great Hossein Arab in 31:00, who nearly five years later unseated him as champion when he returned under the name The Iron Sheik. At about this time, Vince Jr. convinced his father to drop a W, and the WWF came into being.

Pat Patterson was in his early 40s when he came to the WWF after making his reputation in wrestling 14 years earlier with his tag team with Ray Stevens. He was an all-time great worker, but not much of a trainer, as he hated going to the gym. He understood the secret of working with Backlund, and they headlined everywhere for most of the second half of 1979, becoming the first heel in history to headline four consecutive sellout shows as a title challenger. The final Madison Square Garden match, on September 24, 1979 was inside a cage, where Patterson's creativity in working with the cage and hanging from the cage made it the best match of its style up to that point in company history. Backlund followed it up with a horrible match, but still drew a sellout, with Swede Hanson, another large guy who was way past his prime.

The switch of the title to Backlund opened up Japan for the WWF title. Backlund's style, because of the type of people who could carry him, fit in better with the athletic style of Inoki and Tatsumi Fujinami, who Backlund worked classic matches with. Also in Japan, Backlund ended up wrestling title matches against contenders he never faced in the U.S. like Dusty Rhodes, which didn't come close to living up to expectations.

Inoki reached a deal with McMahon to buy the belt for a week. Giant Baba had done that with the NWA title. It was never supposed to be known in the U.S. On November 30, 1979 in Tokushima, Japan, Inoki pinned Backlund to win the title. Backlund was supposed to get it back on December 6, 1979 in Tokyo. A double-cross attempt took place. The finish saw Tiger Jeet Singh interfere, costing Inoki the title. However, Shinma announced the result was a no contest and the title was held up, supposedly pending a rematch. Shinma was given the figurehead WWF President role between Willie Gilzenberg during the Sammartino/Morales era, a McMahon business

partner, who had passed away, and the more famous Jack Tunney during the big expansion. None of this was ever acknowledged in the U.S. by the WWF until about 20 years later.

This was a power play because TV-Asahi was taping the December 17, 1979 Madison Square Garden show. Inoki's double-cross wasn't as much to screw with the title as much as to be put in the main event with Backlund at the Garden to make him look to the Japanese fans like he was an American superstar. McMahon Sr., who was advertising a Backlund vs. Duncum main event, wouldn't go for it. A compromise was reached. While billed as Backlund defending the title on TV leading up to the match, when the bout took place, Backlund didn't come to the ring with the title, nor was he announced by Howard Finkel as champion. In Japan, it was said the belt was held up, but since Inoki was defending his World Martial Arts title (against the Great Hossein Arab) on that show, Backlund and Duncum would decide it, with Backlund winning a bad match. Virtually nobody in MSG actually caught that any of this was going on. That show was also notable because it was the first Madison Square Garden appearance of Hulk Hogan, brought in to become the next generation Graham-like heel, managed by Blassie. Hogan beat Ted DiBiase with a bearhug submission.

Backlund's next opponents were The Wild Samoans, Afia & Sika Anoai, in singles matches. This was the first time in MSG history where the title was clearly not the main event or drawing match on the show, as the sellouts were drawn by Sammartino's last great feud, with protege Zbyszko.

Backlund followed it up on May 19, 1980 with a match of the year win over Patera in a death match and a blood stoppage loss to Zbyszko. While many have forgotten it, Backlund and Hogan did wrestle several matches during this time period. Hogan was inexperienced, but due to his size and look, like a larger Graham, he was tailor made for New York. Even back then, everyone in wrestling could see Hogan's future. They avoided the MSG program where he'd have to lose, and did hold the match in several other markets, as well as in Japan, where Hogan hit it big immediately.

Sammartino vs. Zbyszko ended up being the hottest feud ever in the Northeast, selling out and turning people away everywhere. It was climaxed with a cage match on August 9, 1980 at Shea Stadium, drawing a legitimate 36,295 fans paying \$541,730, the second biggest recorded crowd ever in the U.S., and by far the largest gate ever (it was announced at 40,717 fans, so it could break the Rogers-O'Connor record). Backlund was not the main event, as he teamed with Morales, considered something of a dream team at the time in New York, to beat The Samoans in two straight falls to win the tag titles. The belts were immediately vacated because they ruled you couldn't hold both the singles and tag titles simultaneously.

Backlund also had several supposed title unification matches against most of the major world champions of the era. He had a 61:00 draw with Inoki in Japan with the NWF & WWF belts at stake. On March 25, 1979 in Toronto, he went 39:10 to a double count out in a unification match with Nick Bockwinkel. On September 22, 1980 in Madison Square Garden, he beat NWA champ Harley Race via DQ in 35:14 in Madison Square Garden. On November 7, 1980, he lost to Race via DQ in St. Louis. And on July 4, 1982, he went to a double count out with NWA champion Ric Flair at the Omni in Atlanta.

On October 20, 1980, Backlund lost via DQ to another McMahon Sr. creation who would go onto mainstream fame. Bob Remus of Wilmar, MN came from the AWA as Super Destroyer Mark II, and was given a Drill Sgt. gimmick as Sgt. Slaughter from Paris Island, South Carolina, and would become one of the biggest stars in wrestling within a few years. Stan Hansen was brought in from Japan for a three match series, ending in a cage match where Hansen, who was past the point of doing jobs in the U.S., got his legs tangled in the ropes, allowing Backlund to walk out the door. After some poor matches that drew well with Angelo Mosca and Steele, came a run of some of the best matches of Backlund's reign.

On August 24, 1981, Backlund and Don Muraco went to a tremendous 60:00 draw before a sold out house. Muraco was one of the best in the business, a wrestler good enough at the time to be world champion, except he never showed the necessary dedication to wrestling. He'd work a few months, make some money, then return to Hawaii and surf until the money was out. Backlund won the rematch, and one of his best opponents, Valentine, was brought back and they picked up where they left off with Backlund eventually beating him in a cage. Next came two top notch matches with Adrian Adonis, who had a horrible body which belied the fact he was as gifted a worker as anyone. Many feel that a Backlund's title defense with Adonis at the Capital Centre, which aired nationally at the time on MSG cable live, was the best match of his entire reign.

It was at this time, in early 1982, when Backlund started making the fatal mistakes that ended up destroying his popularity and undoing his charisma, which caused a public backlash against him.

While wrestling in Japan, Backlund met Karl Gotch, who trained the New Japan wrestlers at the time. Gotch was 57 years old. Whether true or not, legend had it that nobody in wrestling could beat him in a shoot because of his vast submission knowledge, even at that age. As a worker, his unique style was incredible, and he was still impressive in the ring. Almost all the technical wrestlers who saw him became enraptured in his stories about training methods and shooting because of how he was so good, and still so tough, at his age. Gotch staunchly opposed weightlifting, coming from the old school of training, favoring high rep calisthenics and unique old-school exercises, such as twirling the clubs like Iron Sheik. He believed this training gave muscles functional long-term strength, since Gotch's submission wrestling skill saw him spend a lifetime of making fools out of bodybuilders and powerlifters, who would be powerful for a few minutes, but then gas out. Backlund, a heavy lifter, was so fascinated by this that he totally changed his training routine. He improved his conditioning. But this was never a problem since he was a worker not a shooter, and his stamina ranked with anyone's in the game. But that kind of training didn't develop as impressive a physique. He wasn't fat at all, but wasn't ripped any longer, and he lost muscle size by not lifting heavy. He didn't look like a stud athlete any longer, because it was his physique that allowed fans to take him as a stud even with his boyish looks, Howdy-Doody looking red hair and bad brawling. Then, he shaved his hair into a crewcut, which may fit in today, but that made him look like a geek in the early 80s.

The next step was the introduction to the WWF of Jimmy Snuka. Snuka was about 5-10 and 245 pounds, a bodybuilder who was all gassed up and with freaky genetics. But more than his power was his flying, particularly his splash off the top. While Rob Van Dam's move is more impressive, at the time,

nobody had seen anyone in the Northeast who could fly like "The Superfly." While Snuka was a heel, people started loving him. While the Backlund-Snuka matches were not nearly as good as legend, on June 28, 1982, Snuka came off the top of the cage with a splash. Backlund moved and Snuka crashed on the mat, feeling more pain than he'd ever felt in a 13-year-career from such a stunt. Backlund climbed out of the cage to win. Snuka was already getting over as a babyface, but that move sealed the deal and became one of those moments that everyone in the building remembered and became larger than life. In the other cities, most notably Philadelphia and Boston, after that point, Snuka was such a favorite that Backlund was booed out of the building for their matches. Snuka was so loved that they were even cheering his hated manager, Albano, in some cities. Albano as a heel was the promotion's staple, so they had to rush a split between the two and a babyface turn. The tide was continuing to turn against Backlund.

Backlund had the right opponents after Snuka, a great ring technician in Orton Jr. (where they pushed the idea that Orton had beaten Backlund when both were high school wrestlers, which was made up since Backlund grew up in Minnesota and Orton in Florida), and a great worker in "Playboy" Buddy Rose. But almost rising from the dead came the all-new Superstar Billy Graham.

Graham had continued to work high on the cards during Backlund's first year, as strong support, wrestling the likes of Monsoon, Strongbow, Rhodes and even a match with Sammartino, who finally gained his revenge, which many felt was a bigger ticket seller on a sold out show than the Backlund-Ladd main event. He left the Northeast at the end of 1978, and largely went into seclusion.

He was burned out, and battling depression and drug problems. He wanted a face run, thinking the time was perfect and that he should have been, second to only Sammartino, the legend of the WWWF. But it never happened. He disappeared from wrestling at that point, and there was little or no communication in those days, so rumors spread he was dying, and then died, of cancer. Monsoon, who wrote a weekly wrestling column in a Philadelphia newspaper, even printed an obituary for Graham, which solidified those stories as fact in many people's eyes, until Graham resurfaced, calling everyone he knew, to tell them he was alive. Even with his distinctive voice, some didn't believe it was him. During the interim, Graham shaved his head, took more steroids than he ever had in his life, and bulked up to 330 pounds during the summer of 1980 to compete in a network TV World's Strongest Man contest, which he didn't do well in, but did confirm he was among the living.

In August of 1982, he returned, looking totally different. He had a shaved head instead of the long bleached hair. He had a dark moustache instead of being clean shaven. His tie died colorful ring costumes were replaced by a black belt and martial arts wear. He was much smaller, more because he was battling drug addictions, a nerve problem on one side of his body which zapped his strength and musculature in one arm, and was rarely working out. He was billed as the world's martial arts champion, although he used no martial arts in his matches. Really, all he had left was his name and his interviews.

But by this point, McMahon Jr. had secretly bought the promotion from his father. Graham's name was all he needed

in New York. His three Madison Square Garden matches with Backlund all sold out. During his career, Graham had 20 MSG main events, with 19 sellouts. His final was a shocking full house for a 1987 match with Butch Reed which was a mid-card level feud, just because the Graham name was so strong in New York. At the time, Graham had avascular necrosis, basically the death of a bone, in both his hip, which was replaced, and his ankle, from 22 years of steroid use. He could do little in the ring, after shortly after that match, never wrestled again, needing his ankle fused into a walking position and suffering through 16 years of pure hell from one medical problem after another. No wrestler in history, not Sammartino, Austin, Hogan, Rocca, Morales, Backlund or Jim Londos, had that kind of a track record in New York. At one point it did appear Rock would equal it, coming up in the hottest wrestling period ever, but that hot period cooled off quickly and didn't even come close to happening. It should be noted not all the cities on the circuit had that success for Graham's return. Most did well, but they didn't sellout anywhere but New York. Philadelphia, in particular, drew poorly for the series. Most of the fans in that city knew about the obituary by Monsoon, who, even after being called by Graham, never printed a retraction. In Philadelphia, the word on the street was the real Graham was dead, and they brought in an imposter. In hindsight, Graham felt the Philadelphia fans were the only ones who were right, since he could never fathom how he made the decision to give up such a tremendous gimmick for such a terrible one.

During this program, they did an angle where Graham stole Backlund's belt, and tried to rip it up, desecrating the title. By today's standards, this angle would have been an embarrassment. Graham tried to rip the ornaments off it, and had very little luck, and tried to smash it, and did little damage. They didn't bother with re-takes in those days, but after the angle, they destroyed the belt but good to show on television. Backlund was already rapidly going from stud to nerd with his haircut, switching to an amateur wrestling singlet, constantly telling kids to do calisthenics and "wheels" (an abdominal exercise which was the rage at the time). He was always a poor interview, but in the early years his persona enabled him to get away with it. But he cried on the air after the belt being destroyed. It was supposed to be an enraged cry, but came across like a baby crying, which isn't what fans wanted from a babyface superhero.

Fans began turning on him, and his matches began getting worse. The crowds were still relatively strong in most cities early in the year, but from the summer on, the territory was in a tailspin. After Backlund pinned Steele in a 39 second main event on August 27, 1983, his MSG matches against The Masked Superstar didn't draw. There was a famous story that night, after Backlund had beaten Steele, and Finkel announced Backlund vs. Superstar for the next show. Traditionally, at the Garden, the pop for the announcement of next month's main event would be among the biggest pops of the show. It was dead silent. While a lot of the arenas were declining, the December 26, 1983 match with Backlund and Iron Sheik not only sold out, but drew about 2,500 more into the Felt Forum. But part of that was old-time wrestling tradition, as house shows the week after Christmas were usually a hot ticket because parents would get tickets for their kids as presents.

But far more important than Backlund's drawing power, were the plans McMahon Jr. had to take over pro wrestling. By 1983, he had already expanded into California, running shows in both Los Angeles (where the local promotion had gone out

of business and the only thing running regularly was Lucha Libre) and in the fall, debuted in San Jose. Los Angeles hadn't had good American style wrestling in years, and just having big wrestling stars come to town led to strong business. San Jose, where the first show was outdoors in a rainstorm, was more telling, as it was the San Francisco market, which Verne Gagne had been running for three years. It was the first time McMahon went in competition with an established promotion. Few took notice, however. Most of the promoters at the time didn't even know California geography, and thought San Jose was in the Los Angeles area, not San Francisco, and he was just opening up in a vacant territory. More importantly, McMahon had also gotten a Sunday morning television show on the USA Network. The promotion that developed the time slot, Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling, was booted off both for being late paying their bills as they had purchased the time, and because the network was upset with them for an angle where one wrestler poured cow dung on the other. The show, called All-American Wrestling, at first didn't even appear to be a WWF show. McMahon hosted the show, doing intros of clips from all the major circuits. Promoters like Verne Gagne, Jim Crockett, Eddie Graham and Fritz Von Erich would send McMahon tapes of their shows, and he'd feature their top stars on the same show as his. The promoters were so naive not to recognize that the wrestlers McMahon featured, like Junkyard Dog, Barry Windham, Kerry Von Erich, Ric Flair and Hogan, were the ones he was most interested in signing away, as he was about to expand nationally.

They shot an angle to air the weekend before the show where Backlund accepted Sheik's Persian club challenge. Backlund was supposed to twirl the clubs, and get attacked, with the clubs landing on his neck and injuring him. It was so sloppily done, as Backlund didn't have the knack for these things. Backlund took the bump and the club came nowhere near his neck, so he, on the ground, grabbed it and rolled it onto his neck and started selling. It looked preposterous, but in those days, angles were so rare that they almost always worked.

Only the most alert fans recognized this TV show to similarities to a show 13 years earlier. On that show, it was announced that Sammartino had a shoulder separation and the doctors said he should postpone his match with Koloff. Sammartino would have none of disappointing the paying customers. With Backlund, the situation was played up similarly.

Even though Sheik was still a good worker, they did not have a good match. Fans were shocked at 11:50, with Backlund caught in the camel clutch, Backlund's manager, Arnold Skaaland, threw in the towel. Sheik was announced as the new champion. Almost nobody understood what was going on, since Sheik was never portrayed as a serious title threat and had only once headlined the building. McMahon Jr. had told Backlund to tell everyone, no matter what, that he was double-crossed on the finish, and that he wasn't aware beforehand that Skaaland would throw in the towel, as a way of saving face. There were wrestlers in the WWF who believed it for some time, even though those involved closely all admitted that wasn't the case. Backlund even told Bret Hart about it one day as if it were a shoot.

Sheik, real name Hossein Kosrow Vaziri, was legitimately Iranian, and in his youth was a very good wrestler. At one point, he was the bodyguard for the Shah during the Kennedy administration. While Sheik had widely bragged about competing in the 1968 Olympics, he was actually eliminated during his country's trials. He defected after the Olympics.

People always believed his story because he wound up in Minnesota, and won the 1971 U.S. AAU Greco-roman nationals at 181 pounds. Because he had yet to establish citizenship, he was ineligible for the 1972 Olympics, but ended up going to Munich as an assistant coach for the U.S. Greco-roman team, and followed it up with the same position in 1976 in Montreal. Verne Gagne went to Munich as well, looking to recruit people into pro wrestling, most notably heavyweight boxer Duane Bobick (who turned him down), Patera and 420-pound bronze medal winning wrestler Chris Taylor. Also at the camp, which included Ric Flair, was Vaziri, who debuted as a muscular 200 pounder. He was stuck in prelims because of his size, and because of that and him being a legit amateur, was cast as a babyface. He later became a heel as the Iron Sheik, doing well in Oregon, the Carolinas and AWA as well as garnering incredible heat in the WWF, largely due to wrestling fans' hatred of Iran due to the hostage crisis. He discovered steroids, and God only knows what other drugs as a pro wrestler, to where he was about 260 pounds, but at this point was still a good athlete, considered among the wrestlers a legend for his hard training, even if fans would have never understood that because Sheik possessed a nice-sized steroid gut, and a feared man. Many in wrestling, because this was a period when not that many amateur stars were involved, plus Sheik had bamboozled people into thinking he'd won a gold medal, thought Sheik was the toughest guy in the business.

The next day, at the Chase Hotel in St. Louis, the WWF held its first TV taping outside its Northeastern territory. A week earlier, they had maneuvered the television contract at KPLR-TV in St. Louis, which had been running wrestling dating back to the late 50s, away from Bob Geigel, Harley Race, Verne Gagne and Pat O'Connor, who had each purchased stock in the company when Muchnick retired in 1982. Ratings had fallen since Muchnick left, as the new ownership wanted to modernize the booking with wilder angles, not realizing it was the booking style that was the reason for Muchnick's success. The station at the time was also negotiating with Muchnick's protege, Larry Matsik, who was running opposition. But McMahon sealed the deal by offering \$2,100 per week to the station and five percent of the gross for all live events in the city. The era of buying TV time was in. The stakes to enter the business were raised, changing the game forever. Showing up at the tapings were Gene Okerlund as an announcer, Roddy Piper as a manager of David Shultz, and as a new top babyface, Hulk Hogan. Hogan had been featured in previous weeks on All-American Wrestling with tapes provided by Gagne. Two nights earlier, Hogan, the top face and draw, Shultz, his area heel rival, and Okerlund, the local announcer with a cult following, had no-showed Gagne's Christmas night show in St. Paul, which had drawn a sellout of 18,000 fans. Well, that may not be the perfect terminology, because Hogan actually had wired ten days before the show that he wasn't going to appear, but never let on as to why. Hogan was his biggest draw. In 1982-83 in St. Paul, shows without Hogan on top averaged 8,000 as he spent much of the year with New Japan; shows with Hogan averaged 16,000, remarkable in a market the size of the Twin Cities. Gagne, like most of the promoters of that and future eras only cared about the next show, and future goodwill was not part of the equation. Gagne continued to advertise him anyway. It was pretty clear where this was headed.

The most important thing in those days in drawing besides television exposure, was the man on top. While Backlund had a name in the Northeast from seven years of being pushed, the new Backlund would have been a disaster on top nationally,

particularly in most of the new markets where he'd be compared to Ric Flair, the world champion in most of the places McMahon was planning on going. Snuka was actually, by far, the most popular wrestler in the territory at the time, and had tremendous charisma. He couldn't do a good interview, but that actually didn't work against him. But he was a walking time bomb. He had drug issues. There was an incident where his girlfriend died in his room in Allentown. There was another drug-induced brawl with a bevy of police officers in Syracuse. He was simply too big a risk. McMahon Jr. knew back in 1980 that Hogan was the going to be the man, just as sure as he had seen Graham sellout everywhere, and his success in the AWA and Japan had made him the biggest draw in the sport. It was not a difficult choice, nor a brilliant one, to see what move needed to be made.

There was actually a power play, as McMahon Sr. took pity on Backlund, and at first it was announced a Sheik vs. Backlund rematch for January 23, 1984. Hogan, who was promised the belt right away if he were to leave Gagne, smelled a double-cross and went to Junior. The next week, they did an interview segment for the show, announcing that Backlund had been injured in the match with Sheik and wouldn't be allowed to wrestle. Backlund was brought out for an interview, with the idea that he would endorse Hogan as his replacement. He did no such thing, doing a sad interview where he made no sense, clearly bitter of being, in his mind, double-crossed on the rematch.

Gagne, when realizing that Hogan had left him, and more importantly to him, McMahon was going to run shows in his territory with "his" biggest draw, offered Sheik \$100,000, a ton of money at the time, to double-cross Hogan and injure him in the match. As it turned out, Sheik felt that even though Gagne started him, it was with McMahon Sr. that he made his first real money with, and figured that was a better person to be on the good side of.

Hogan, 28 at the time, legdropped Sheik in 5:30 before a double sellout, and the entire wrestling world should have taken notice. At 6-5 1/2 and close to 320 pounds with massive proportions, like Graham, heavily into steroids, he was the biggest champion up to that point in wrestling history. And he would be considered that in more ways than one. Ironically, even though it was obvious what was happening, much of McMahon Jr.'s opposition didn't react for a few months. By then it was too late. Well, almost.

MARCH 31, 2003

In a follow-up to last week's WWWF title story, Hogan was actually 30, not 28, when he won the title from Iron Sheik

Another follow-up from some months back, there was definitely talk of a Jack Brisco vs. Bruno Sammartino title vs. title match in Atlanta, which would have been in 1975, so Brisco's story about Backlund being the replacement makes sense. Others involved in decision making during that time period have vague recollections of people trying to put it together. There was also serious talk, although I'm not certain how far it got, in late 1973, to do a Brisco vs. Pedro Morales match. There was also at least one more title vs. title match with the WWWF champ vs. NWA champ not mentioned, as there was a Harley Race vs. Bob Backlund match in early 1978 in Jacksonville. It was

actually billed as the Super Bowl (the Miami match) rematch with Race vs. Graham, but Graham lost the title before the match and Backlund took his place. Also, in the Backlund-Graham title change at MSG, in fact, Backlund didn't attack Graham's leg. When Graham didn't limp, Backlund never went near the leg

APRIL 7, 2003

Another follow-up on the WWWF history piece. An interesting match took place on May 27, 1977 in St. Louis as Billy Graham, in one of his first out of territory title defenses less than a month after winning the title, beat Bob Backlund before 5,000 fans in the main event in St. Louis.

APRIL 14, 2003

THE READERS' PAGES

HISTORY OF WWWF

Your issue on Bruno Sammartino's first title reign was unbelievable. I lived it, tasted it and was there for all of it. You captured it, which was incredible, considering you didn't live it. How on Earth you did it I don't know?

When a hockey playoff game is lost by the home team in overtime, possibly the worst thing possible for a fan and an arena, there is a shriek of horror when the goal goes in. When Bruno lost, no shriek. Complete pin-drop silence.

In the second article, you captured the essence of the time period in every way, especially with regard to the fans turning Billy Graham, which was unheard of in those days from the WWWF clientele. It was the same for Jimmy Snuka. Graham got hot on his own. Snuka was a combination with Bob Backlund, as the fans loved Snuka and were tiring of Backlund.

Backlund drew well for six years. Even though the undercards in his era were more loaded than ever before, he still was on top for six very long years.

Just for the record, the dead silence for Howard Finkel's announcement of the Bob Backlund vs. Masked Superstar main event was followed the next month by one of the least climactic finishes to an MSG main event. Superstar was known for his neckbreaker. After working Backlund over most of the match and delivering it, Backlund, prone, somehow cradled Superstars' legs with his own for an out-of-nowhere small package.

As for the year long Backlund TV build-up, you left out the main TV match. It was similar to the Madison Square Garden elimination match. I remember Tor Kamata being all bloodied up and Backlund prevailing against all odds. That got him over territory-wide.

Yes, one of the biggest pops at ever show was the long-awaited announcement before the final match of "the next big show." Finkel was great. As always, Vince Sr. was in the back, and could gauge the fans' interest in the main event and how

long to do the program, as well as the interest in all the new faces and heels with that very simple test marketing.

I spoke to Ken Patera. He told me a story of playing a round of golf with Jim Brunzell, Animal and Curt Hennig about a year ago. He said that he, who lived that kind of a life and had seen it all and done it all, was shocked to see Hennig's indulgences. By 10 a.m., he had smoked two joints drank a six-pack and taken a handful of percocets along with other things. Even Patera was taken aback by this.

Jeff Bukantz

I finally finished reading the article, all at once, on the history of the WWWF and have to say it was excellent. I'd rank it as the best non-obituary piece I've read in the Observer in a long time, and that includes the awesome death of the post-30 year old wrestling fan article in 2001. Just reading it gave me a sense of how magical some of those times were, and also a sense of awe at how simple things were booked back then, yet how successful they were at the same time.

Mike Coughlin

I'm not a long-time reader, having subscribed only since July 2001. However, I've been able to read and acquire many back issues, dating back to the first issue of the Observer more than 20 years ago. The March 24, 2003 issue is one of the finest pieces of historical wrestling journalism I've ever seen. I thought the week before was great. You've outdone yourself with this one. Your look back at that era of the WWWF is one that I will read and re-read time and again. I had no idea about many of the things there, such as the Bruno Sammartino vs. Superstar Graham cage match. Your ability to color in detail is to be commended, rich in history, great in dramatic tone, the edition should be in your most requested issues of all-time in no time flat.

Jason Hess

Thanks for your excellent rundowns in the Observer on the WWF title belt. Your history pretty much parallels my own interest in the sport and was at a few of the matches you wrote about.

I was fascinated by the fact Bob Backlund was illiterate. Do you know if he can read or write now?

I started watching wrestling with the IWA in 1975 or 1976. It was on WOR in New York at midnights on Saturday night. Later I discovered the WWWF on Spanish language Ch. 47. My recollection is it was on late Saturday afternoon and late Sunday afternoon. The first WWWF image I remember is Blackjack Lanza & Mulligan as a tag team. On IWA, I remember Mighty Igor breaking a basketball off his chest, Mil Mascaras as world champion and Ernie Ladd turning heel. That was a shock around the schoolyard.

One day, without explanation or advanced warning, the IWA show was replaced on Ch. 9 by WWWF. With that the show carried a parental warning with Vince saying "the following program requires discretionary viewer participation."

The thing that made the champion at the time seem like so much of a legend was that he almost never wrestled on television, and we only saw him on interviews. Heels always

walked into the interviews on Vince's left, faces on his right, so you always knew who was who. Bruno Sammartino always gave the most dignified interviews. He used to call McMahon "Vinnie." Vince would always give the heel, or the triumvirate of heel managers, a total look of disgust with every word they spoke. He usually ended with a coarse, "thank you for your time."

I could never go the MSG at the time because nobody under 14 was allowed to attend. When I turned 14, I begged my father to take me. The first show after I turned 14 was Billy Graham vs. Mascaras, but for some reason I missed that, but did see Graham vs. Backlund. My sister couldn't go, because she was only 12, and she was quite disappointed since she watched wrestling with me. Even then she was old enough to know it was fixed. To this day, she has never attended a live event.

I guess from when e was on TV before he became champion, or from his interviews, Graham became my favorite wrestler and I remember being in a state of shock when he lost, especially since it was the first live event I ever saw. To top it off, five days earlier, my other sports hero, Muhammad Ali, had lost to Leon Spinks. I always hated Backlund and wouldn't go to MSG until June 1982 for the cage match with Jimmy Snuka. After that, I attended Backlund matches with Bob Orton Jr. and Buddy Rose, then went to college. In November 1982, I was at the Meadowlands to see Backlund against Ray Stevens. I saw the George Steele squash and over my Christmas break, saw Iron Sheik beat Backlund. Backlund losing that match was almost as big a shock to me as the night I saw him win it.

Michael Kraus

DM: Backlund taught himself to read and write when he was in his early 40s after retiring from wrestling the first time.

APRIL 21, 2003

From December 27, 1983, it was evident that pro wrestling was going to be changing greatly, and fast.

Hulk Hogan was the biggest star of the AWA, in the middle of a main event program with David Shultz. Gene Okerlund was the company's cult favorite TV announcer given the name "Mean Gene" by Jesse Ventura. Roddy Piper was the No. 2 singles babyface for Jim Crockett Promotions (behind traveling world champion Ric Flair). They were all in St. Louis, at the famed Chase Hotel, for a TV taping for KPLR-TV for "Wrestling at the Chase," the longtime flagship show of the NWA. A few days earlier, nobody would have batted an eye about it. But it was not an NWA taping. The promoter of the event was Vince McMahon Jr., who had recently purchased the World Wrestling Federation from his father.

While St. Louis had weakened greatly as a wrestling capital in the two years since the retirement of Sam Muchnick and ratings were falling dangerously, the local promotion was still doing solid live business. Most shows were doing over 7,000 fans. The television has gotten atrocious, but it was still, in pro wrestling, St. Louis, a term that had special meaning inside the business. McMahon Jr. had expanded the WWF already to Los Angeles and San Jose, but nobody took much notice since

neither city had a local wrestling circuit any longer, so it wasn't like he was stepping on anyone's toes. Georgia Championship Wrestling had, a few years earlier due to its exposure on cable, very successfully moved into Michigan and Ohio, where The Sheik's promotion still claimed as its territory, even though they went into cities Sheik had stopped running and GCW stayed away from Detroit.

But this was a first move. KPLR-TV, upset with declining ratings since Muchnick retired and his unique method of promoting and booking started to change, began negotiating with both Larry Matysik and McMahon. Matysik, the long-time television announcer, had been left in charge by Muchnick when he retired, but quit over the fact the new owners, Verne Gagne, Bob Geigel, Harley Race and Pat O'Connor, were doing things he thought detrimental to business. He had started up an opposition group, with Bruiser Brody as his top star. His promotion ran a few shows with Brody and a few outlaws, largely wrestlers from Southwest Championship Wrestling in San Antonio, local legend Lou Thesz as a referee, Dick Murdoch and a blacklisted super worker largely unknown in most of the country, Randy "Macho Man" Savage. He drew about 4,000 a show, before going on hold, hoping for the soon to be open traditional market TV time slot. McMahon offered the station \$2,100 per week and five percent of the gross at all events in the city. He was representing the country's biggest grossing promotion with an established stable of major stars. About all Matysik could offer in comparison was the knowledge to promote the way Muchnick did, but without the access to the kind of talent Muchnick had. Ted Kopplar of KPLR-TV made the obvious decision, and suggested McMahon and Matysik work together in the city. Matysik, as a Muchnick disciple, proved to be a fish out of water in McMahon's new version of pro wrestling.

The idea of promoters buying the television time for their show, and using the show as a promotion vehicle for the live events, where they made money, was not done for the first time with this deal. Still, it was believed to have been the largest money offer of its kind for a time slot in that sized market. Most of the major promoters and their local television stations had built up a great rapport over the years. Promoters would supply the shows, for free in most cases. A few stations even paid the production costs in places like Houston and Portland, where the weekend wrestling show was a local institution for generations on the station. Jerry Jarrett, because of the ratings he was drawing, by far the highest rated wrestling show in the country at the time, actually got paid by the station for his show in Memphis. The station would have an hour that in many cities was very highly rated programming to sell ad time for without programming costs. The promoters were content not to share in the ad revenue, because they were in business of making money promoting live events. But when McMahon came to the major markets and offered the TV station that carried wrestling in those markets big money to switch to his tapes in the regular wrestling time slot, many stations jumped at the chance. McMahon also began attempting to raid the regional promoters of their biggest stars. While McMahon would sign marketable, and even not so marketable talent, from every promotion, he seemed to take great glee in particular in warring with Verne Gagne. Some time earlier, McMahon had met with Gagne and offered to buy the AWA. Gagne was the most successful he'd ever been. Hogan was his money draw but he had a solid stable of charismatic wrestlers who knew how to talk people into buying tickets, and selling the company was the last thing on his mind.

McMahon targeted not just Hogan, but anyone from the Gagne organization he could, from TV producer Al DeRusha, his son Gary the Juice, outdated television announcer Roger Kent. He ended up with much of Gagne's stable, including by the end of 1984, manager Bobby Heenan and Jesse Ventura. McMahon in many markets also bought Gagne's TV stations as well. He even raided 60-year-old Mad Dog Vachon, who was far too old to get over in a new territory, if only because he was still a cult favorite in Gagne's cities. McMahon ran shows in the old AWA cities using the top AWA feud (Hogan vs. Shultz), with the AWA's top announcer pitching the match, with shows in the traditional time slot on the traditional station. While the AWA represented a longstanding tradition, in many cities they had to establish new stars, on a new time slot.

As did the NWA in St. Louis. McMahon's father was perhaps the strongest member of the existing cartel of promoters, largely known as the NWA (of which he had been a member since rejoining in 1972), but that also included the AWA. Historically, as happened in places like Detroit and Atlanta for bitter wars, but in many other markets for smaller wars, if a company would start up in opposition, the NWA would send talent to help its regional outpost put the competition down for the count.

McMahon wanted to be more than simply the boss of the Northeast, and in fact, wanted to be more than a wrestling promoter, which many times proved to be his Achilles heel. After Hogan pinned the Iron Sheik on January 23, 1984 in Madison Square Garden, it was clear that pro wrestling, as it had been known, would never be the same.

Vince McMahon Sr. was still alive at this point, and his long-time friends were asking questions. Vince Jr. was buying their TV time and running shows in their territory. There were many mysteries about what Sr. knew and didn't know. Vince Jr. always claimed that if his father knew what his plans were, he would have never sold him the business. Those with intimate knowledge of both McMahons have concurred with this much. Vince Sr. knew what his son was planning, but expected him to fail. There were quarterly payments for acquiring the business. If McMahon Jr. failed to make even one payment, the business would fall back in the hands of the Sr.'s previous partners, most notably Philadelphia promoter Phil Zacko and retired wrestlers and area small-town promoters and road agents Bob Marella (Gorilla Monsoon) and Arnold Skaaland. Sr. knew far more than his fellow promoters realized, as he told his friend Wally Karbo a year before Hogan was raided of his son's plans, and to sell his AWA stock. Don Owen got a similar warning. Others were told different things by Sr. It was quite clever, because at first, the promoters didn't organize, as the most powerful ones, like Jack Adkisson (Fritz Von Erich), were told Vince was going to expand to some places, but not against him in Texas (which with the popularity of the local group at the time, would have seemed foolhardy until it started faltering). Adkisson was told McMahon was putting his TV in Dallas and throughout Texas because he needed all the major markets to sell national ad time. McMahon Sr. passed away in May 1984, the same week his former cartel members tried to work together to run in the Northeast as retaliation for his son running in their territories.

Gagne, Jim Crockett, Ole Anderson, Jerry Jarrett, Carlos Colon and Bill Watts, among others, got together, under the auspices of Chicago White Sox owner and former failed wrestling promoter Eddie Einhorn (who lost a wrestling war in New York years earlier to McMahon's father when he couldn't

gain access to most of the area arenas or sustain business after a strong opening show), to form Pro Wrestling USA. , a company that would retaliate by running live events in the Northeast pooling the top talent, Adkisson, whose sons were getting a national following and were huge in Boston off syndicated TV, didn't join in. Watts and Jarrett, used to being in control, didn't like that the new group considered them as "B" members and wasn't going to push their main event talent as the top stars. They quickly broke from the organization. It got so bad that the promoters, all used to not listening to anyone, and making money in a regional monopolistic business, couldn't even agree where to get lunch. McMahon also wanted to do things only his way, but he had no partners to answer to.

The short version of the wrestling war is that within five years, all the formerly major promoters were either out of business, or weakened greatly to where they were of no serious consequence. Vince Jr. just about won the war outright. But a lot happened in those five years, including some memorable matches in the ring, but most of the important things were outside the ring.

Wrestling was changing greatly, and the regional promoters were about to fail, because it was a new game. The advent of cable television for national exposure meant at the end, only a few strong promotions, somewhere between one and three, were going to be able to survive, because all but the most hardcore fans would eventually only follow what they considered to be the major league group. After a few years, what kept competition alive was the debate over which group was the major league, as they had different approaches and presented different products.

In the opposition scorecard, Gagne survived until 1991, largely due to a contract with ESPN, because he ceased being competitive and taken seriously in his own markets as a major league entity by 1987. Watts lasted until 1987. Crockett, who was the most competitive and offered a product very different from McMahon with the harder working and far bloodier action, was actually often beating McMahon in cable TV ratings nationally, as well as at the gate in most of the Southeast. He even won a short-term promotional war in one of McMahon's strongholds in Baltimore. In an attempt to keep Crockett from being competitive, McMahon told all arenas he was running that he would pull out if they gave opposition groups dates. The result was Crockett was usually running in the secondary building in most major markets, except in the Southeast, where the major arenas went with him because McMahon's show still wasn't able to do well. Crockett was outdrawing McMahon in Baltimore at the time, and when McMahon made the ultimatum, the Arena, the only major facility in the city, went with Crockett. In Philadelphia, even though they were running a secondary arena, the sides were dueling evenly for a while, with Crockett actually ahead at one point unless Hogan was on the bill in opposition. Still, a combination of bad booking, which saw attendance drop seriously in 1987, being outmaneuvered on the big deals, and the cost of maintaining television and by early 1988 Crockett was staring into bankruptcy. Before the year was out, he had sold to Ted Turner.

Crockett, like Vince, largely inherited a regional monopoly from his father of the same name, Jim Crockett Sr., known as "Big Jim." Like Vince Sr., Crockett Sr. had run a certain formula style regional promotion, based around tag teams that worked there forever and made a decent living. While not successful on Vince Sr.'s level, as Greensboro and Charlotte, his key cities, were hardly New York, Boston, Baltimore and

Philadelphia, he was a fixture promoting not just wrestling events, but in a promotional company with partner Joe Murnick that handled concerts, Globetrotters, a minor league baseball team and other entities. He was very well connected. His son, who took over when his father passed away, was in some ways similar to Vince Jr. He grew up a big fan of the product, in each case more than their fathers who saw themselves as businessmen who promoted wrestling. He made bold moves and was aggressive in changing the formula and acquiring big stars like Johnny Valentine, Blackjack Mulligan and Wahoo McDaniel, as well as creating a stable of young stars, most notably Ric Flair, Roddy Piper and Ricky Steamboat. To insiders, the quality of wrestling in the Carolinas during that period was second to none. There were fans in what would be called border markets, between Richmond, VA and Washington, DC, who in the late 70s and early 80s could see television from both groups, and WWF was a distant second. But within the WWF home market, it was a monopoly and was built on the tradition of Sammartino, and like the AWA, did tremendous business since its fans saw nothing else to compare the slower product with.

When Toronto wrestling fell off after The Sheik ran his course, and Frank Tunney couldn't get it going using people like Bruno Sammartino and the AWA's biggest stars, it was largely Crockett's big guns, Flair and Steamboat, who got the city back going strong. Soon, Toronto got its television from the Crockett tapings in Raleigh, augmented by local tapings for Canadian content. To make a loop, they also expanded into Buffalo and Niagara Falls, as well as Cincinnati.

But in the Carolinas, Crockett was untouched. Just as McMahon had great relations with the arenas in the Northeast, making it difficult or impossible for opposition to run, Crockett, from his father's connections, had similar relations. It was funny at the time, as those in the WWF would curse how they couldn't even get dates at the Greensboro and Charlotte Coliseums, not realizing the irony that it was the same game they were playing keeping opposition out of Madison Square Garden. Crockett hired Dusty Rhodes from Eddie Graham as booker in 1984, as regular booker Dory Funk was spending so much time in Japan. Rhodes put together what is now a legendary crew of headliners, and had the company's three strongest years of business ever. Crockett knew he was in a fight early on, but felt he had the better wrestlers and the stronger product, and ultimately, would win out. In what turned out to be one of the major moves at the time, Jack Tunney, who took over Toronto when his uncle Frank Tunney passed away, saw business flopping. Crockett, afraid Tunney would switch allegiances to McMahon, stopped supplying him with top talent after the war started in 1984, even though his talent was had drawn several sellouts at Maple Leaf Gardens the previous year. He was sending him Jimmy Valiant and Paul Jones as headliners, and business was falling to well below the end of The Sheik levels. Crockett's paranoia turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy because Tunney had nowhere to turn but McMahon, who welcomed the idea of getting control of one of North America's traditionally strongest markets. It wasn't long before Flair was replaced as the city's wrestling hero by Hogan, and the switch to WWF immediately turned business around.

Gagne thought the whole thing was unfair, consumed with old-boy rules that were broken, conveniently forgetting that in the late 1960s, he went into Los Angeles to compete against an established NWA group in a short but bitter promotional war. He'd become a millionaire with a product that fans in his

territory consider a golden era with the greatest wrestlers, but the reality was, his concepts and television were years behind the rest of the country, and his biggest stars were very old. He was doing huge business in his core cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, Winnipeg, Milwaukee and Denver, and successfully expanded into Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. But in San Francisco, where cable television was far stronger and fans could see the faster wrestling out of Atlanta, the AWA's slower and older matches with Midwest historical institutions like The Crusher, Baron Von Raschke, Nick Bockwinkel, and Mad Dog Vachon never took hold. It was the same reason the slower WWF never fully got over in many Southeastern markets, literally until memories of the old style were dead. In some markets that didn't happen until the late 90s due to the popularity of Steve Austin.

Due to the popularity of cable, Gagne got a date on Tommy Rich, the biggest young star created by TBS cable, for a show in the Bay Area, and it drew double of what Hogan was drawing on top. There was no question who the people had come to see. But in 1984, when McMahon expanded to making the Bay Area a regular stop, they immediately started out drawing the AWA by a 10,000 to 2,000 margin and the same Hogan who was not drawing in the AWA, became the biggest consistent draw in the market since the early 60s heyday of Ray Stevens. Not only that, but WWF was drawing just as well with Piper on top in his feud with Jimmy Snuka as it was with Hogan and his contender of the month.

Gagne complained about wrestlers leaving him, even though he never put them under contract, and McMahon gave them opportunities to earn more money, even though the road schedule was far more difficult. In hindsight, many wrestlers, even though Gagne wasn't well liked as a promoter, recognize that in the pre-1984 period making good money working 12 to 15 dates per month was a wonderful time in their careers, and they remembered them a lot better than making more money but being drugged out of their minds working 27 dates a month, constantly criss-crossing the country, for McMahon. But it was McMahon who made them national celebrities.

The Gagne product, which was based on great talkers, and maybe three angles per year, didn't matter as compared with the rest of the country. The Midwest didn't get cable as quickly, so until 1984, many Midwest markets saw nothing else, and would sell out for the latest reuniting of The Bruiser & The Crusher, even though they were 55 and 58 respectively, took no bumps, sold nothing, and had lame and limited offense. And even in the cities that did, the AWA names were so established based on so many years they were comfortable with the very loyal area fans. As a monopoly promoter in his cities, he had a product that his long-time audience was familiar with, and then things exploded when Hogan brought in a new and younger audience. McMahon made picking on Gagne personal. But Gagne was so far out of touch as far as wrestling on the national scale went, that he couldn't catch up fast enough. McMahon went into Gagne's territory first, and with Hogan, Andre, Ventura, Heenan, Shultz and so many others on his shows, beat Gagne with what was his strongest advantage, the familiarity edge with the performers. Gagne still managed to be competitive for a few years, largely by bringing in the Road Warriors and later Sgt. Slaughter, and an on-again, off-again relationship with Bruiser Brody (and to a lesser extent Stan Hansen). His attempts to create new stars from an idea standpoint were pathetic. Scott Hall became Magnum Scott Hall, since Rhodes had created a new star in Terry Allen as Magnum T.A. Two of Crockett's best tag teams were the

Midnight Express and Rock & Roll Express, so trying to be hip and recreate that gimmick, he put together Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty as the Midnight Rockers, who turned into a super team and actually were a huge hit, and as soon as word got out of how good they were, they ended up leaving for WWF anyway. But it was clear early on in a national war, he was going to lose.

Watts and Jarrett had the best wrestling minds, but they were running in areas with smaller population bases. While most of the promoters took the tact of ignoring McMahon, Watts would show tapes of when McMahon's wrestlers were in his territory, and act as if they were current matches, showing his wrestlers scoring wins while he and Jim Ross would talk about it showing Mid South wrestling's athletic superiority. Watts used the tactic of constantly running down the opposition, as he talked about Hogan's inability to work more than ten minutes and the WWF's no-show problems at the time. Ole Anderson had done similar things on Atlanta television, but they came across far more mean spirited and were not effective. Both Watts and Jarrett, who promoted a faster and more action oriented style of wrestling and a more soap opera oriented television show, immediately took solace the way promoters of that time would, that McMahon's shows were bombing in their territory. Still, Watts was scared to death when Junkyard Dog, his home grown biggest attraction, jumped, leaving with no notice, simply no-showing a string of main events, to the point he was questioning if it would be the end of his business. But when McMahon would promote a show in their territory, they would book a show the day of, or day before, load up with shows by bringing in hot attractions from outside the territory, for a battle. McMahon lost most of those battles badly over the first few years, as routinely, Jarrett or Watts would put 6,000 to 9,000 familiar fans into their buildings, while McMahon would come in, with Andre, Hogan and even JYD and usually do 1,500 to 2,000 fans. But what they didn't recognize at the time was this war wasn't going to be decided by wrestling fans. Lance Russell, Jarrett's announcer, with a long-time background in television programming, was one of the first to see the writing on the wall, when Saturday Night's Main Event debuted in 1985 in Memphis. It was Russell who came up with the idea of putting wrestling on Saturday morning, when the general feeling was it was a disaster waiting to happen because only young children watched television then. It turned out to be a huge success. Lawler and Jarrett were hoping their relationship with the NBC affiliate, WMC-TV, which ran their shows for 90 minutes on Saturday morning (they were the highest rated show on the station, even ahead of network prime time) would keep them from even airing SNME. Instead, SNME aired in Memphis, and pulled in big ratings. Russell, even as his company was winning the local battle at the arenas and doing great local business weekly behind Lawler and the Fabulous Ones, saw the first airing of SNME in the market as what would prove to be the telling blow.

Hogan, as WWF champion, was the biggest money player in wrestling in 1984, but he wasn't without competition, even in his own company. During the summer, Sgt. Slaughter turned babyface and caught fire with a jingoistic feud with the Iron Sheik that sold out Madison Square Garden twice, and for a short period seemed as hot as Hogan. While Snuka was fading due to drug issues, his rival, Piper, became the hottest heel in the country, to the surprise of almost nobody who had seen him in that role for the past few years, perhaps except McMahon Jr., who brought him in to be the third manager with Lou Albano and Fred Blassie, since Ernie Roth, the Grand Wizard, had passed away. But Piper got so much heat so

early, and his grudge matches with Snuka did such business, that his managing days ended quickly. This opened the door for Bobby Heenan, who arrived in September. Later, when Lou Albano was planned for a babyface turn, it led to the arrival of Jimmy Hart. Other leading draws at the time were Flair, as touring NWA champion and the Road Warriors building momentum as attractions off their exposure on TBS. Also, with World Class wrestling having syndication in many big markets, The Von Erichs were a hot act, feuding in Texas with the Freebirds in one of pro wrestling's all-time greatest rivalries. Kerry Von Erich's NWA title win over Flair at Texas Stadium in honor of late brother David before 32,123 fans paying \$402,000—the second biggest gate in U.S. history on May 5, 1984, was probably the biggest U.S. match of that year.

Bob Backlund, the former champion, also didn't fit into the new WWF. Still, even as former champion, Backlund drew two more MSG sellouts against former rival Greg Valentine, although these were loaded shows, with Slaughter vs. Sheik being the hottest match on the latter show, and Andre the Giant making Piper into a top heel was really the big draw on the former show. In a tag match on March 25, 1984 before a sold out Garden and Felt Forum, Piper, who was working as a manager still, teamed with Shultz, against Snuka, after the coconut angle, and Andre. Andre sold more for Piper than he had for all but his biggest opponents, and when clips of Andre selling for Piper aired on the USA Network, Piper, despite the supposed size issue, was taken seriously by everyone as a serious main event heel. McMahon Jr., over the summer, told Backlund, who was fading into oblivion quickly, he wanted him to dye his hair and turn heel for a program with Hogan. He said he wouldn't, and was fired. While the opposition tried to use Backlund, his work had declined and his character had changed to where they couldn't do a thing with him. His career sputtered quickly and before long, one of the world's five biggest stars over a six year period was working in Connecticut installing dry wall.

By the end of the year, McMahon also fired Slaughter over a merchandise dispute and because he'd gotten wind Slaughter was talking about unionizing the wrestlers. It was more of a ballsy move than Backlund, because to outsiders, Slaughter appeared to be on fire and had crowd pops that rivaled Hogan's. But crowd pops and drawing power were two different animals. McMahon, in the middle of the biggest wrestling war in U.S. history, cut loose his second most popular wrestler, and gave his opposition a drawing card to work against him in his own territory.

It was almost a blind man's bluff game. Slaughter was on fire in the summer of 1984 with his feud with Sheik. The media was picking up on wrestling through what turned out to be the master stroke of involving Cyndi Lauper in a storyline with Piper, Lou Albano, Wendi Richter and Fabulous Moolah. By the fall, Slaughter was not drawing well for McMahon, even though he made a great public figure because he had such a great wrestling name and what he represented.

After he was cut loose, it was clear the opposition would build their shows around him since it was the short-term thing to do, which was also obviously a mistake since it had already been established by that point in WWF that he was a short-term gimmick. Slaughter also, because of his gimmick, while he had once been a great bump taking big man, recognized he was so over he could cheerlead his way through matches. That made him a somewhat out of place when the opposition tried to battle in New York on the better workrate platform. Unlike Steve

Austin a generation later, he lived off his glory and also was able to make a big career comeback years later in the WWF. Slaughter tore the house down, by himself (when the New Jersey commission declared 400-pound partner Jerry Blackwell unfit to wrestle the day of the event), winning a tag team Battle Royal just two months after his firing at the Meadowlands in front of 19,000 fans. But the NWA/AWA conglomerate decided to build everything around Slaughter, taking third-rate heel Jim Darrell, who Watts gave the ring name Boris Zurkov (changed to Zhukov by this time because of the obvious rhyming play on words), to be his foreign menace opponent. They booked him like Superman as the top star, instead of pushing their own talent as comparable stars. Crowds quickly fell off for the Meadowlands shows, and soon the group was dead. At the same time, Crockett was far more successful using his own stars in cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia.

But who did what in what cities was no longer material. Hogan did great business as a draw in the Northeast, at first doing the old champion formula. In the rest of the country, it was hit and miss. In markets where the local promotion was weak or nonexistent, Hogan and the WWF stars were accepted with open arms and usually drew very well. In markets with strong local promotions that had established fan bases that liked a faster-paced style, they didn't do nearly as well. Hogan's strengths were in California, the Northeast, Detroit, Toronto and most of Canada (after McMahon bought Stu Hart's Stampede territory, which led to the arrival of Bret Hart and the British Bulldogs). He did great at first in St. Louis, but soon wore out there, as the local fans rejected both new styles of promotion. He did well in Florida, strong in most of the Midwest where he was already a huge name from the AWA days (although Hogan never, in the WWF, drew the kind of consistent numbers he put up in Minneapolis for Gagne). When going into the Jarrett or Watts territories, and later in Texas and Georgia, Dallas, and eventually the Carolinas when they finally got in, neither Hogan, nor the company, drew well.

But the key moves had nothing to do with Hogan or the title. McMahon's purchase of Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc., in April 1984 was stage one, although a court fight delayed his taking over until July. The key to that purchase, for \$750,000, was McMahon owned programming rights for the most watched wrestling show in the country, the Saturday and Sunday 6:05 p.m. airings of wrestling on Ted Turner's Superstation. Since McMahon was already broadcasting a weekend show and a Tuesday night prime time show (called Prime Time Wrestling three weeks a month, and Tuesday Night Titans a fourth) on USA network, it gave him a cable monopoly during an important period, when the mainstream media discovered pro wrestling, believing it was something that had died in the 50s and was making a comeback. The other key move of the year was a deal made with David Wolf, the manager of Cyndi Lauper, who was one of the hottest rock stars of that year. She had interest in wrestling, having met Albano on a plane, and used Albano as her father in the rock video to her biggest hit, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." They parlayed that into a wrestling angle, with her appearing on Piper's Pit on the syndicated show. Piper & Albano played heel to Lauper, eventually ending up with a challenge, as Lauper managed Wendi Richter, against Albano, managing Fabulous Moolah.

This was not a big deal angle among wrestling fans, even though it was hyped incredibly, like few angles of the time. But to the non-wrestling fan audience, it was probably the biggest

wrestling event since wrestling was on network TV in the 50s. The match, dubbed the "Brawl to Settle it All," took place on July 23, 1984 in Madison Square Garden. From an old-school wrestling promoter standpoint, it was not a success. The show drew 15,000 fans, the weakest crowd of the year in the building. Moolah vs. Richter was pushed as the main event, but Hogan, who had sold out every MSG appearance since his return, was put on the card in a title defense against Greg Valentine with the idea that it would draw the wrestling audience. When ticket sales were still soft, the last week before the show, they added a Battle Royal (interestingly enough, won by Antonio Inoki), which at the time was the biggest drawing gimmick match in wrestling. Richter won the title from Moolah, who had held the belt on-and-off since 1956, in a horrible match. But the one hour special delivered a 9.0 rating, the second highest rated event on MTV in history. Hogan's role was this huge blond muscleman that a new audience saw, with his belt, congratulating Richter after the win. The fact that all that hype led to a non-sellout had McMahon's rivals, most of whom barely knew MTV existed, believing that wrestling fans were rejecting his vision of the product.

They also believed, because the old WWF champion formula was no longer working, that Hogan wasn't going to have legs as champion. There were different beliefs, the biggest being he was so physically big as a babyface that you couldn't get heat on him and people wouldn't believe in the challengers. Hogan's title matches were usually about eight minutes, sometimes as short as three minutes, and some pointed to The Sheik being a gigantic draw at first but then killing cities over the long term with short main events. In markets where Hogan would work consecutive months against the same opponent, his first match usually drew well, but the return match business was usually significantly down, unlike with previous champions who usually drew better on the returns as the grudges built. Two things happened. With McMahon running so many shows, and by the late 80s he was running three full tours and 980 shows per year (about triple the number they currently run and nearly five times the number they ran during the late 90s glory period) the key was to have Hogan only work a market a few times a year, and as an occasional attraction. This also meant instead of building programs with indecisive endings, he usually won clean with his legdrop finisher and posed at the end of the show. Hogan drew a new audience, that was really more interested in his musical ring entrance and post match posing to music as much as his actual title defenses. His appearances became a huge draw except in the markets that rejected WWF.

But where the NWA made its mistakes in the swing markets, like St. Louis and Florida, and over the long-term in their strongholds, was in booking the world title. Hogan's actual biggest rival as the biggest star in the game at the time, Flair, was being booked in the same manner as all NWA champions had been booked since Muchnick lost a power play in the mid-70s as NWA President. Muchnick believed in keeping the champion strong, and eventually he would need to pin all his top challengers at the end of the program, even if there were teases and screw-jobs along the way. After Muchnick, the usage of the belt was more short-sighted, used to get the contenders who worked the territory over and feeling it was the chase for the belt with the local hero that drew. The champion's role in the NWA was to look weak and put over the challenger, making him look like an uncrowned champion, so fans would pay to see the local hero gain his elusive title win, which just about never happened. Since the champion toured and only worked a city a few times a year, the belt itself

remained a draw, although the champion did not draw as well in the late 70s as the early 70s. That may have also been due to the state of regional wrestling in most parts of the country. Now, in a war time situation, the big markets needed Flair, the biggest draw, far more frequently. It was also the end of what was the National Wrestling Alliance in theory, since Crockett wanted Flair to work all his big shows, so it became harder and harder for other NWA members to get good dates on the champion, and the other regionals faded out because their product couldn't stand next to the glitz of the WWF on local TV or the quality of wrestlers on TBS cable. Dallas pulled out of the NWA, although that was inevitable since they also wanted to tour nationally, which, with exception of a huge success the first time in Boston, failed quickly. Even though Watts wasn't an NWA member, he and Crockett got into a pissing match about dates on Flair, and his not using Flair was also inevitable, since he was going to tour nationally. Both Watts and Adkisson created their own world champions. Crockett himself purchased what was left of failing offices in Kansas City and Florida, attempting to use those territories as minor league satellite groups, but both those ideas failed quickly.

When fans in a city, say Chicago, saw Hogan one night and Flair the next, they saw a huge dominating charismatic guy who usually won (and in the end of the program, always won), in Hogan, even though the match was short. With Flair, they saw a longer match, with far more wrestling, far more big moves, and tons of near falls and better build. But in the end, the result was a screw-job with the champion looking weak. Flair survived that to a degree because he was such a good talker, but ultimately, most casual fans that grew up in those markets on the NWA title, began to see Hogan as the real world champion. To the mainstream, he was the only champion.

To the media, it didn't matter that Crockett was also doing great business with Flair and Dusty Rhodes in most places they went at the time, or that Watts had his biggest years ever, or that Von Erich and Flair were drawing very strongly almost everywhere they went. Cyndi Lauper was at a wrestling show in Madison Square Garden and "suddenly" wrestling was drawing big crowds at the Garden, forgetting that it had been doing so regularly in that building for the previous 13 years. The media credited McMahon with creating a wrestling resurgence and bringing a new younger audience to wrestling. This irked the long-time promoters, most of whom had strong years in opposition in 1985, and had built their companies around younger pretty boy babyface talent than McMahon and had already established a large teenage audience, particularly with women.

McMahon produced a Tuesday night comedy show with wrestlers, the famed Tuesday Night Titans, or TNT for short, that was doing a 3.9 rating, which most copycat media outlets credited with making wrestling mainstream and bringing a new young audience to the table. The fact that these were largely the same fans watching the other three Tuesdays, that averaged a 4.0 for a diet of two hours of long and boring time-filling wrestling matches from arenas; and far lower than what wrestling was doing over the weekend in what would be considered a bad time slot on TBS for years, also wasn't relevant. But wrestling with the war had gotten more interesting, fans couldn't get enough of it on television, and in some markets, soon there was anywhere from 20 to 35 hours of pro wrestling on per week. Gagne, whose business had started falling when Hogan left, was one of the few holdovers from the 50s, and recognized while this looked good from the

outside, it was too much product on free television that had killed the business in the 50s, and immediately predicted a reoccurrence.

Hogan, as champion, went through people like Valentine, Shultz, Iron Sheik, John Studd, Nikolai Volkoff and Paul Orndorff in 1984. He appeared eight times that year in Madison Square Garden, selling out five times (failing with Valentine, because Valentine had already lost to Backlund two months earlier and the match made no booking sense; once with Jesse Ventura, who despite his own recollections of his career wasn't a strong draw on top, in a match that never took place as Ventura had blood clots and was rushed to the hospital before the match and John Studd took his place, and the second meeting with Studd. Ironically, there were five other MSG shows that year, headlined by Backlund vs. Valentine twice, Slaughter vs. Sheik and Piper against Snuka and Tonga Kid, all of which also sold out.

While Hogan and Piper were clearly the two big stars, they were kept away from each other, with Piper working first with Snuka, and then after he went to drug rehab, they brought in Sam Fatu as his young cousin, the Tonga Kid. Piper's main events drew about the same as Hogan's in the strong markets, even with the 190-pound teenage unknown opponent. Tonga Kid was actually the older brother of current star Rikishi, and his career never came close to the level it had when he first started out. He still wrestles independently nearly two decades later, and now weighs about 400 pounds.

"The War to Settle the Score" between Hogan and Piper took place on February 18, 1985 at Madison Square Garden. Unlike Moolah-Richter, this was a major happening as a live event, selling out both the Garden and Felt Forum with more than 24,000 fans, and doing a 9.1 rating on MTV. It was the highest rated wrestling show ever on cable television, and it's doubtful that record will ever be broken. Lauper was involved again, attacked by Piper, until an enraged Mr. T made the save. In the days before there was a UFC, all the myths about bad ass fighters were prevalent. To the general public, there was nobody badder than Mr. T. He had been the star as lead heel in a box office smash movie with a storyline right out of pro wrestling, *Rocky III*, as Sylvester Stallone's most dangerous opponent, a movie that saw Hogan gain his first mainstream exposure in as well. Mr. T had won a gimmicked contest as the world's toughest bouncer, to make a rep. He then became the big drawing card on one of the country's highest rated TV shows called "The A Team," the hottest drama series on the air. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say Mr. T, at the time, was the biggest short-term TV star in the country. While Lauper garnered a lot of publicity for wrestling, it was nothing compared to what Mr. T doing a wrestling match would give, not to mention the rub McMahon Jr.'s biggest star, Hogan would get, by towering over the 5-foot-10 inch man who everyone feared as supposedly the world's toughest street fighter, because of both hype and because of how deceptively small Sylvester Stallone really was. In addition, his top heels, Piper and Orndorff, would get the rub of being in the match with him and standing up to him. Piper, in particular, verbally took the ball and ran for a touchdown, becoming a legend for his comedic and often racial remarks at the guy the public thought was the real deal. Well before that MTV special, the idea of Wrestlemania was born.

This was a huge gamble on a lot of levels. Even though WWF was winning on more fronts than it was losing in the wrestling war, the company was losing money in doing so. As much as

live business falling, what did in nearly every promotion from the territorial days was the escalating cost of television, from the example McMahon set. Television stations saw wrestling as a product that would pay them big money to air, and when warring companies bid against each other, the rates quickly skyrocketed. It was the cost of maintaining TV exposure in the big markets that played a major part, although not the only part, in doing in both Watts and later Crockett, as well as, years later, both Jim Cornette's Smoky Mountain Wrestling and Paul Heyman's ECW. McMahon was way behind in paying his TV bills, and Wrestlemania was very close to a necessary gamble because he needed some major cash.

It was funny, because even though Mr. T was an actor, it was he who gave the event legitimacy. Even though he was smaller than his opponents, people believed he was the real tough guy in the match because he picked up such a reputation as a bouncer and bodyguard with his unique look and menacing scowl. They believed that while wrestling was fake, Mr. T was real, and many believed the match would be a shoot, especially because of how effectively Piper was riding him on his promos. It was funny, because wrestling fans at the time saw it exactly opposite. Within wrestling, Mr. T was heavily resented for walking in and getting a main event without earning his stripes, nor, at least being a football star, as pro wrestlers of the era saw NFL players as at least something real and felt they gave wrestling sports credibility. David Shultz, a noted tough guy in pro wrestling, ended up losing his job in the WWF because he wanted to pick a fight with T, when he was making a promotional appearance at a house show in Los Angeles. A rival promoter made an offer to Bruiser Brody to hop the rail and try and take out Mr. T with a quick sucker blow as he came to the ring to ruin the show, which Brody never took seriously. They almost didn't need to do it, because Mr. T decided to back out the day of the show. At the same time, McMahon and Hogan had their hands full, because neither Piper nor Orndorff were willing to put over a non-wrestler, which was part of the agreement to get T to do the match. Hogan managed to convince Mr. T to come back, as he was scared to death, never having done pro wrestling and fearful something would go wrong and it would kill his reputation. Orndorff eventually agreed to do the job. But even though it was Mr. T who drew all the media attention and made it the event it was, it was clear, to the audience that paid that Hogan got an even bigger reaction. The fallout was that all questions were answered. Hogan was now the bigger star on the wrestling turf.

McMahon booked 200 arenas around North America for March 31, 1985. It was a given that Madison Square Garden would sellout, and it did, immediately, for Hogan & Mr. T, with Snuka in their corner, against Piper & Orndorff, with Bob Orton Jr. in their corner. The last attempt at closed circuit for pro wrestling, Ali vs. Inoki nine years earlier, was not a success, and Ali was far more of a proven fighting draw than Mr. T. McMahon went wild, bringing in Ali as a ref for the main event (in actuality, Pat Patterson was the ref to make sure the match stayed under control while Ali was outside the ring wearing a ref shirt and doing one planned spot). Billy Martin as ring announcer, Liberace and the Rockettes dancing. Still, with a week to go, the advances in most of the country were bad and it looked like a disaster. About 70 arenas were canceled because of poor sales. But the show picked up tremendous momentum in the last week, from Hogan & Mr. T doing Letterman and Saturday Night Live, and Hogan choking out talk show host Richard Belzer, which cost him several hundred grand, but also bought him and the show more than that in late publicity. It was a huge

success—in most places, and clearly established McMahon as the greatest promoter in the business. It appeared the war was over—except, old-line promoters like Watts, Paul Boesch, Adkisson and Crockett took solace. Wrestlemania bombed in their territories, and with more publicity than any event in history had ever gotten. In St. Louis, the show drew about 3,000 fans and was not well received, and WWF had trouble drawing in that city for many years afterwards. This strengthened their belief that McMahon's style of wrestling wasn't going to work where fans were weaned on top quality in-ring wrestling.

But they were the kings of New York, and New York was where all the decision makers lived. Dick Ebersol convinced NBC to put a wrestling special on in the Saturday Night Live time slot on May 11, 1985, and it drew an 8.8 rating for a show where Hogan pinned Orton and Mr. T made an appearance, a little above what SNL was doing at the time. By October, they were running every month or two in the time slot, and beating SNL's ratings almost every time out. On January 4, 1986, a show headlined by Hogan vs. Terry Funk drew a 10.4 rating, the second highest rating for a television show in that time slot in the history of U.S. television. They created a merchandise empire, a television cable and syndicated package which when all the ratings of the different shows were combined for one week, using unique mathematics, was billed as one of the highest rated syndicated television shows in the country. Hogan was the star of a Saturday Morning cartoon on CBS. The NBC exposure put WWF so far ahead of the pack except with the pre-1984 fans, and with most of the top talent wanting to jump on board, the regional promotions were inevitably going to lose their top draws. The handwriting was on the wall, even though it took a few years before it came to fruition.

McMahon did suffer one significant loss, that of TBS. McMahon made no friends early when tapes of his matches took the place of the TV studio matches in Atlanta with the Georgia wrestlers. Ratings dropped, although not to nearly the level they would after he lost the time slot. With more than a thousand complaints after July 14, 1984, known at the time in wrestling as "Black Saturday," when McMahon took over the show with tapes of the same matches that were already airing on the USA Network, Turner immediately gave Ole Anderson a time slot at 7 a.m. to keep a local wrestling show with icon announcer Gordon Solie on and enabling Anderson to open up a new promotion, the short-lived Championship Wrestling from Georgia, Inc., infuriating McMahon who thought he had just purchased Georgia Championship Wrestling to legally shut it down. Worse, in early 1985, Turner made a verbal partnership with Watts, giving him a Sunday one hour time slot for Mid South Wrestling, which was to prelude the two becoming partners. Turner agreed to bankroll Watts to run nationally against McMahon. The Mid South show was an immediate embarrassment to McMahon. Watts' Mid South Wrestling was generally considered the best booked and most entertaining wrestling show at the time. But it was also a very regional looking show that ESPN turned down because of perceived lack of star power and production values, being taped at the Irish McNeill Boys Club in Shreveport, instead of a major arena. It was post produced in Bill's garage by his son Joel. Given a time slot not familiar to wrestling fans, Watts' show on TBS outrated both the McMahon shows on the station as well as his shows on the USA Network, averaging a 5.3 rating, and for the first 13 weeks, was the highest rated show in the country on cable television. Turner was about to throw McMahon off the station, give the prime slots to Watts, and work with him in going national. Jim Barnett, who knew Turner

better than anyone in wrestling and who was a VP at the time for McMahon, became the intermediary in brokering a deal with McMahon and Crockett. Crockett paid McMahon \$1 million for the rights to wrestling on the station and promised to tape weekly in the studio. Turner was happy to be rid of McMahon, and knew Crockett, with area favorites like Rhodes and Flair, had bigger stars than Watts. Watts, a public ally of Crockett as he used Flair and Rhodes often on his big shows, bowed out gracefully in public after losing the power play. On the final episode of Mid South Wrestling on TBS, he told fans it was their last episode on the station, but that you'd be seeing great wrestling on the station from the NWA from that point forward. Again, history was changed going forward in ways nobody will ever be able to truly ascertain.

Business fell off greatly after Wrestlemania, enough that McMahon was worried. Even though the event was very profitable and gave him incredible publicity, McMahon's opponents relished in the idea he'd done himself more harm than good and shot his wad. McMahon even got David Sammartino, who he was using as a prelim wrestler, to convince his father to come out of retirement to try and revitalize Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Boston and his other Northeast strongholds. Sammartino, who was 49, had settled his lawsuit against the company after Sr. passed away, and agreed to work for the company again as a television announcer alongside McMahon (later, Jesse Ventura was added to the team), working 17 dates per year, where he would do commentary on three shows per taping, for \$100,000. Under the guise that it would be the boost to David's career that he needed, and as a way to try and make up because the two had a rocky relationship, he agreed to return as part of a father-and-son tag team. Sammartino proved the rules of a nostalgia act. He drew turn away crowds the first time in almost every arena that he had a history in (the exception being Madison Square Garden where even an appearance by Sammartino and a Hogan vs. Don Muraco match drew 15,000), better than Hogan was doing at the time. But repeat business fell off greatly, even more than it did with Hogan.

Hogan and Flair remained the top stars as the war continued on all fronts, with both groups drawing well, although McMahon may have been rockier with a higher payroll and higher television expense commitments. On July 6, 1985, at the Charlotte Baseball Stadium, Flair wrestled a muscle head stiff named Nikita Koloff, and sold the stadium out, drawing 27,000 fans and \$300,000. The success of Koloff, whose main attributes were freaky shoulders and menacing eyes, was a tribute to Rhodes' character development. Koloff had never wrestled, and had barely been trained (he was in the same Minnesota group as the Road Warriors, Rick Rude and Barry Darsow, but was injured early in the camp and mainly just watched). Rhodes came up with the idea that he was a superheavyweight weightlifter from Russia, the nephew of veteran heel Ivan Koloff, who was taking his grudges out on the Americans who he blamed politically for the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympic games. He was protected even more than the Road Warriors, who by the time Nikita had showed up were right at the top of the list of biggest stars in the game world wide. He sold for nobody, and they all sold for him. Probably the best equivalent was a Russian Bill Goldberg. When he attacked TV announcer and co-promoter David Crockett, Flair was put in the role of having to tame the beast for the U.S. on a show Rhodes named "The Great American Bash."

But the big money match was Flair vs. Rhodes, and eventually, one of them had to turn. Flair was more popular at the time and a bigger draw, but also more comfortable working heel, and outside the Carolinas was mainly a heel anyway. It was a hugely controversial decision within the Carolinas to turn their native son and biggest star heel, but at first, the Flair-Rhodes program paid huge dividends. Rhodes, as booker, turned Flair heel in late 1985 using the a reprise of a legendary angle he had done with Ole Anderson years earlier in Atlanta that had such impact that people were talking about for years (and students in OVW still have to study it). After Flair had beaten Nikita Koloff in a cage match, he was being ganged up on by a variety of heels. Rhodes saved Flair. Then everyone in the cage all turned on, and injured Rhodes, leaving him for dead and taking him out of action with a worked broken foot. It was even done in the same building, the Omni in Atlanta. The third Starrcade, an annual Thanksgiving night closed-circuit show with live events in both Atlanta and Greensboro, was headlined by their first big singles match. The differences between the third Starrcade and the first Wrestlemania were huge. This was faster paced, more heated and far bloodier wrestling, with nearly everyone on the show blading. Crockett did \$936,000 on the show between the two live gates and closed-circuit. While that couldn't compare with the \$4.3 million Wrestlemania had done, he did it on a far more regional basis, with 17 locations and 2 live spots ad opposed to 133 locations and one live spot, and with no mainstream media or celebrities. But Crockett got a huge slap in the face when at about the same time, *Sports Illustrated* did a monstrous story on the pro wrestling boom, and Hogan was put on the cover with photos of the wackiest and freakiest looking gimmick wrestlers of the time, like Kamala and the Missing Link. It was the highest profile mainstream exposure Hogan and wrestling had gotten. In the nearly 20-page story, neither Flair nor Rhodes' name were ever mentioned.

On August 13, 1985, the WWF booked a live event as part of the Ohio State Fair in Columbus, OH. It was a free show with a \$4 admission to the fair that night. Promoters of fairs around the country were stunned as more than 50,000 fans watched Hogan beat John Studd, breaking the all-time attendance record set on June 30, 1961 when Buddy Rogers won the NWA title from Pat O'Connor at Comiskey Park in Chicago. However, an attempt to capitalize on Wrestlemania, without celebrities, saw McMahon do a PPV show called "The Wrestling Classic" from Chicago on November 7, 1985, headlined by Hogan vs. Piper in a singles match. Piper once again refusing to do the job, so it ended with a DQ finish on Piper. The show only drew about 12,000 paid, and flopped on PPV with 50,000 buys (which was actually a 2.5 percent buy rate, but they were expecting far more). The one-night tournament included classic (for the time) confrontations like Ricky Steamboat vs. Davey Boy Smith and Dynamite Kid vs. Randy Savage (where U.S. fans saw their first superplex off the top rope). Plans for running PPV shows every two or three months were dropped, and it wasn't until 1989 that the company ran four PPV events in the same year.

The second Wrestlemania was not the success of the first. This was an attempt to outdo Starrcade's two locations, running three, the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island, the Horizon in Chicago and the Los Angeles Sports Arena, each for one hour. Each city would get its own main event, with Mr. T vs. Piper in a boxing match in New York, Hogan vs. King Kong Bundy in a cage match in Los Angeles, and a Battle Royal in Chicago involving several NFL football players,

including William "Refrigerator" Perry of the home town Bears, who had become the biggest media star in football that year.

Chicago only drew 9,000 fans, the weakest turnout ever for a Mania event. Nassau was sold out, and Los Angeles was close. Hogan and Bundy had shot an angle where Bundy squashed and injured Hogan on a Saturday Night's Main Event. Hogan came back going for revenge beating Bundy with TV star Robert Conrad as referee in a less than ordinary match. It was not a Wrestlemania dream match, nor anything mainstream media cared about, but with a slew of celebrities, Mr. T and Perry, they show got plenty of ink again that wrestling would not normally get. It was more than worthwhile in the end, even though business was down about 20% from the first Mania. T, who knew the truth of his facade as the baddest man on the planet, was supposed to train under Joe Frazier to get in shape for his worked boxing match. Piper himself had boxed as a teenager and was known in wrestling for his hand speed, and considered a tough guy even though he was a relatively small heavyweight at the time. T wouldn't train, feeling that if word got out of people seeing him train that he had no boxing ability, or worse, that he was getting handled by boxers in training, his entire rep would be shot. Piper and T had two secret training sessions, and those who saw them knew well in advance the match would be a disaster, because T had no stamina with the gloves on. Worse, the public had almost done a 180 on him over the course of the previous year. Piper, who taunted him with racial remarks, became the babyface, which forced the promotions' hand in turning him. As the new face, Piper got bigger face pops than Hogan, but Hogan still remained the big drawing card over the summer and fall. The Battle Royal showcased Andre, who was far bigger than Perry, and Andre went over. The visual of Andre in there with several big football players including genuine stars like Jimbo Covert, Bill Fralic, Russ Francis (who himself wrestled years earlier and came from a wrestling family) and Ernie Holmes (who had retired and who very briefly tried pro wrestling in Georgia a few years earlier) and towering over them made newspapers around the country. The Battle Royal was also notable as the forgotten only in-ring Wrestlemania appearance of Sammartino.

It was funny, because even though Hogan had become the biggest mainstream name in U.S. pro wrestling since at least Gorgeous George, and maybe farther back than that, McMahon always had the feeling he wasn't going to have a long shelf life. And he wasn't alone. The fear was more that Hogan's receding hair line, which made him look older than he was really, would inevitably hurt his drawing power. It got to the point where both Piper and heel announcer Jesse Ventura were told in no uncertain terms that various criticisms of Hogan were not allowed on television, and the biggest one was about his hairline.

The first person McMahon considered as Hogan's eventual replacement was a story with almost comical ironies. Stu Hart had just started training one of the most unique athletic specimens anyone had ever seen. If you could tailor make a wrestler, the guy would almost be the prototype.

Tom Magee was about 6-5 and 275 pounds. He was less than an inch shorter than Hogan, with movie star looks, had a competition bodybuilder physique that was even more impressive than Hogan's. He was nine years younger, just 24, but already had a versatile athletic resume like few in history. He was a World's Strongest Man contest winner. He had already won the Canadian national powerlifting championship

four times in the superheavyweight division, with a 573 competition bench press and 860 squat and was a world champion in that sport and was among the strongest men in the world. Where he differed from other strongmen types is he wasn't nearly as heavy, and had a small waist with great muscular definition and proportions. He had won bodybuilding contests, and had a background in both boxing and gymnastics, as well as holding a black belt in karate. A movie had already been made about him called "Man of Steel." He could do back flips in the ring, and land on his feet after taking a backdrop. His first pro match was a year earlier, a main event on a major All Japan show where he lost to Riki Choshu, a company where people in their first pro match aren't exactly considered for main events. Magee had many talking about him as the next big thing. He was the greatest combination of strength and agility the business had ever seen, and it was evident after only one pro match.

But as it turned out, there were a few "minor" flaws. He couldn't wrestle to save his life, although guys with great physiques were getting over in those days with minimal and in some cases no working ability. But worse, he had almost an amazing lack of charisma, and another even worse talent. The more he trained to wrestle, the worse he got. He also came off as almost effeminate in the ring, and his offense looked so horrible that fans trained to be marks for physiques wouldn't even get behind him. After three years in wrestling he had a match against an almost as untalented aging national sumo hero in Japan named Hiroshi Wajima that quickly became a classic as the measuring stick by which bad matches were judged.

But on October 6, 1986, those weaknesses weren't known. He was simply a green super athlete getting his first shot at the big time. McMahon brought Magee into Rochester, NY, for a television taping for a dark match try-out, figuring it was his first chance to see a future superstar live. The crowd saw this large, impressive looking unknown back flip into the ring on his ring entrance, and were immediately stunned. He was put in the ring with one of the company's solid mid-card heels who was expected to carry him, and kind of surprise people, when he beat the established star. The place went nuts, and the match blew away everything else on the show. The newcomer was far better than they hoped for, or thought possible. McMahon, watching the monitor, screamed loudly, so that everyone could hear, "That's my next champion." As he came through the curtain, McMahon and Pat Patterson fawned all over him. Everyone in the company was told about the guy who they had just signed up, who would be kept off television and working "C" team shows, always being put over, to gain experience for a megaphush maybe a year down the line, and when the time was right, the WWF title. They named him Tom "Megaman" Magee. McMahon and Patterson were hardly the only ones fooled by the match. Bob Matthews, the sports columnist in the local newspaper in Rochester, who attended the show, also wrote that he had seen the most impressive newcomer he'd ever seen, and also pegged him as Hogan's inevitable replacement. As it turned out, they all had, in that match, seen Hogan's eventual replacement and the future WWF champion when McMahon decided Hogan's time was up. But it was the job guy who made one of the most untalented wrestlers to come along look like he was the second coming—Bret Hart. It was more than a year before McMahon and the rest of the company were able to figure out why Magee, who had looked so incredible, this giant doing Tiger Mask gymnastics, was having so many off nights in a row afterwards, and seemingly getting worse by the week.

But it may have subconsciously triggered something in McMahon. In May 1987, shortly after Wrestlemania III, after McMahon recognized Magee as a failed experiment, another huge bodybuilder came knocking. Jim Hellwig had already gained notice in wrestling as having just about the best physique and least ability in a business that was being more and more populated by guys with good physiques and little ability. The 29-year-old former Mr. Georgia, who had placed in the top six in his weight a few years earlier in the Mr. America contest, had, in 18 months, been fired by both Jerry Jarrett and later Bill Watts, after both had tried to push him to little or no avail. He wound up in Texas, given the name Dingo Warrior, where he didn't have good matches nor did he seem to have a grasp of what the business was about, balking at the idea of putting people over who didn't have a physique comparable to his, which basically meant, nobody. He also was terrible on interviews, but he did get over as a babyface. He left after a pay dispute, and at about the same time he was contacted by officials of New Japan Pro Wrestling, the company that first made Hogan into a bonafide superstar and major draw.

In an attempt to copy McMahon's star making formula, they enlisted the country's most famous late night talk show host, their version of Johnny Carson (or by today's terms, Jay Leno), to manage a huge American monster—the biggest bodybuilder to ever step foot in Japan. Remember, this was coming on the heels of the success of the Road Warriors, who were huge in Japan even though they were not great wrestlers. He would be wearing a mask, and have a futuristic ring costume complete with a headgear that blew some sort of steam out of large horns. The character would be named Big Van Vader.

But before he was to go, he was given a WWF tryout. After seeing him in the ring, he got what would be considered today something equivalent to a developmental contract.

After Magee, nobody was proclaiming the latest big bodybuilder of the month as Hogan's replacement. Hellwig was just told he would be given regular work on "C" shows, and put on television when he was ready. While terrible in the ring, that audience reacted to good physiques provided there was a modicum of charisma to go with them. Hellwig had learned that much in Texas, and he was getting tremendous reactions on the "C" shows. Just before he was scheduled to leave for Japan and become the newest foreign superstar, he was brought to television quicker than expected, and renamed The Ultimate Warrior, which was actually a nickname Calgary wrestler Badnews Allen coined for himself, and had used for years. The crowd reacted so well to him that before long, he was the next man on the list of "the guy to eventually replace Hogan." He backed out of his Japan deal, and scrambling, Masa Saito found a much bigger, but fatter, equally green ex-football player who had just debuted in the AWA named Leon White to take the costume.

Following on the success of the show a year earlier in Charlotte, Crockett tried his most ambitious promotion yet, "the Great American Bash on tour." Rhodes peaked a number of angles, with the idea that Flair would defend the title 17 times against 17 different opponents (although actually the latter wasn't the case) throughout July and early August of 1986. They also booked country music star David Allan Coe to perform at all the stops, but while to Rhodes, the mixing of pro wrestling and country music made sense, it didn't to wrestling fans, who treated Coe's performance like it was a long intermission. They also jacked up ticket prices to levels that WWF had never taken them, with \$50 ringside, in a day when

\$12 or \$15 was the norm for a big show. The tour started out as a disaster on July 1 in Philadelphia at Veterans Memorial Stadium. Flair vs. Hawk drew a little over 10,000 paid to the huge stadium, although they did break the city's all-time gate record at more than \$212,000. But in their attempts to use blood to win Philadelphia, they were doing juice in just about every match. Midway through the show, after more than a half-dozen wrestlers had sliced their forehead, a razor blade got lodged into the forehead of Wahoo McDaniel. Commissioner James J. Bins was repulsed, and decided to cancel the show. A panicked Rhodes and Crockett, fearing it would kill them in Philadelphia, as none of the biggest stars had even come out, begged him to let them continue. He let the show go, but ruled there would be no more blood. Not just on the show, but in Pennsylvania, as blading would cause their promoter's license to be revoked and cause the wrestler doing it to be suspended. Maryland soon followed suit, and Crockett's big advantage over the bloodless McMahon shows was gone. The tour had its hits and misses. They drew 23,000 fans in Charlotte with Flair vs. Ricky Morton at the stadium. With jacked up prices, Rhodes beating Flair for a two-week title run nearly sold out Greensboro and did \$260,000. A match with Flair vs. Rhodes at RFK Stadium in Washington, DC did well under 10,000. A match with Road Warrior Animal was a disaster at Riverfront Stadium, doing about 5,000, and a cage match with Rhodes at Fulton County Stadium did 10,000—all numbers they could have put into an arena.

WWE only tried one stadium show that summer, and it changed what everyone perceived was possible for a big match to draw. Orndorff, who was one of Hogan's early victims and a top heel through Mania, had turned face and formed a tag team with Hogan. A former college football star at the University of Tampa, who had an NFL tryout and also played in the old WFL, he was considered one of the best athletes and toughest guys in the business. More importantly, the 36-year-old Orndorff was considered one of the best performers in the business at the time, a hard working and aggressive heel. Naturally, in McMahon family tradition, when the champion starts working tag team matches, in most cases it is an obvious build for a turn. It was Hogan's most successful house show run of his career, and probably the most successful in company's history until the real golden period under Austin. Hogan and Orndorff set attendance and gate records in their first meetings almost everywhere in the late summer and fall of 1986.

Their most famous match was August 28, 1986 at Exhibition Stadium in Toronto. It was known ahead of time this was going to be a hot feud, and Toronto had in the past drawn more than 20,000 fans for stadium shows involving Flair and Harley Race over the NWA title, and this was expected to break that city's all-time mark. But the demand was at unheard of levels on the first day, leaving everyone stunned. When all was said and done, they sold out the stadium with 61,470 paid (about 64,100 in the building, but reported as 69,300) and a gate of \$1.1 million Canadian, destroying every North American record by a huge margin. Few took the Hogan-Studd record from the previous year that seriously, as it was really a free show. But this was the real deal and it was something no event in pro wrestling history in North America had ever approached. They did DQ finishes in all the first meetings, in all but a handful of cases with Orndorff getting his hand raised to set up title can change hands via DQ rematches. Two notable exceptions were the Toronto stadium show, where Hogan won via DQ, and sort of in their first Detroit meeting where they sold out Joe Louis Arena with more than 18,000 fans. The crowd was so hot

that night that an audible was called, as fearing a riot if they did what was planned, they decided to raise Hogan's hand via DQ. Since interviews had already been cut for the market based on the planned finish, later in the show, when announcing a return match on the next show, it was announced the decision from earlier had been changed and Orndorff was ruled the winner via DQ.

Because the feud was expected to be so hot, they changed the normal booking pattern of Hogan being a two or three time a year attraction in the major market cities, and decided to send him on two, and in most cases, three consecutive shows with Orndorff, with the third meeting being cage matches, where Hogan would decisively win.

The first meeting drew well everywhere, and sold out in many markets that Hogan had never sold out in before, and set pro wrestling attendance and gate records in numerous cities. It is largely forgotten that the second meetings were down 40 percent across the board, and even the climactic cage matches didn't do much better.

It was also in the middle of this program, with Orndorff, earning \$20,000 a week, an unheard of number in wrestling in those days, that he suffered a similar neck injury as many of the recent WWE wrestlers. He was told by doctors that he needed surgery and should retire. He didn't walk away from this kind of money, and the nerve damage caused his arm to atrophy. He was never the same in the ring, and was forced to retire for several years. He did make a comeback and wrestled well into his late 40s, but was never anywhere close to the same level of a star or performer, and became almost known for his disproportionate physique with the weak side. Probably the most famous thing he did after this program, was in a WCW dressing room while working as a road agent and getting into a heated argument with Vader about getting ready for a promo. In the melee, he clocked nearly 400-pound Vader with his weak arm in a brawl, knocking the big man down, and putting the boots to him. When the feud ran its course at the arenas, which at the time were still the key moneymakers for the company besides Mania, it ended with the final cage match, that aired on the January 3, 1987 Saturday Night Main Event. This was the original cage match tie finish in getting out and hitting the floor through the magic of post-production, causing them to re-start. Hogan won one of his longest matches of the era, lasting 15:00. The show broke the previous ratings record with a 10.6. The company now, officially, had the highest rated show in the history of television in that time slot.

Still, drawing that kind of a crowd in Toronto led to the most ambitious plan of all and what is generally considered the high point of Hogan's reign as champion, and some say McMahon's as promoter (although I would heavily dispute that), Wrestlemania III at the Pontiac Silverdome.

From 1974, when he first started touring around the world, until probably 1982, when Hogan caught fire in the AWA, the biggest attraction in wrestling was Andre the Giant. He was the biggest man in the profession, with freakish proportions, because his hands and head due to acromegaly were far larger than even a normal giant. But by that time, Andre, who due to his disease, aged much faster than a normal man, was old and crippled. He was 40 years old, and was in excess of 515 pounds on his 6-10 frame.

When McMahon went national, the days of Andre touring the different circuits was over, and he became a regular. He had a

successful program with John Studd as a battle of the giants, but he knew his career was over. In 1984 and 1985, he did what he considered his farewell matches as a main event attraction, when he put over Canek clean in Mexico City after a bodyslam and Antonio Inoki clean in Japan by submission with an armbar. He had done few jobs during the previous 16 years since arriving in Montreal after being discovered while wrestling in Europe and Japan. He hadn't done any clean ones in more than a decade and most fans generally believed he had been undefeated for his entire career, as he was always promoted. But his last program in the U.S. where he donned as mask as Giant Machine, teaming with Super Machine (Bill Eadie, later Demolition Ax), against Bundy & Studd, was probably the worst drawing main event feud since the company went national. He had back surgery and considered retirement. Although he ended up living six years longer, there was fear he wasn't long for the world. While physically he couldn't do a thing because of his back problems, if he was going to do what he did for Canek and Inoki in North America, it was clear this had to be the year.

Andre went heel, managed by Heenan. The match was made in January. Andre was kept out of the ring until a Battle Royal, in Detroit on February 21, 1987. Hogan and Andre were in it, and they only did a spot or two to tease. Andre, totally immobile in the ring, went over in the Battle Royal. The show aired on March 14, 1987 in the Saturday Night Live time slot, and drew what is still the largest rating in television history in that time slot, an 11.6. It is a record that, due to the changes in television with so much more competition, will also probably never be broken.

Still, this Mania was very different from the first two. The first two were built around celebrities and mainstream media coverage. While time has blurred memories and because of the size of the live crowd, people think it got mainstream attention like never before, the opposite was the case. Wrestlemania III got very little mainstream attention except Hogan and Andre going on with long-time wrestling fan Regis Philbin (where co-host Kathy Lee Gifford, having seen both, noted they looked to be about the same height and Regis, freaked out because of Andre's supposed 7-foot-4 myth, and said nervously that Andre was eight inches taller).

But it was much bigger than the previous two. It was built around a simple pro wrestling angle and match. Two unbeatable forces were facing off (Hogan himself had stopped doing jobs when he left the WWF in early 1981 and the new generation of fans was never even aware he had a first WWF run). Fans simply couldn't perceive of either of them losing. There were no celebrities in the ring, or even managing at ringside. Almost nobody had seen Andre ever lose, and the WWF, which was rewriting history far more in those days, claimed not only that it never happened, but that the two had never wrestled before (even though they had feuded from Alabama to Japan to WWF to Toronto to the Superdome in New Orleans, the Omni in Atlanta and the Los Angeles Sports Arena from 1978 through 1981 in very high profile matches). In Detroit, which was the major market near Pontiac, Andre had lost in his early U.S. days to The Sheik, but the fans of those days were long gone by 1987 and it was a totally different game.

The singles match on March 29, 1987 was by far the biggest event in pro wrestling history. It set every record, some of which, due to technological changes, will never be broken. The scene of Hogan body slamming and leg dropping Andre for the

three count in 12:01 and the number 93,173 will likely be part of wrestling folklore for as long as the McMahon family controls wrestling history. It's the American version in some way of Ali vs. Inoki, a horrible match, which as memories fade and time has gone on, is remembered as the ultimate legendary match in the history of the cultures biggest wrestling figure. It was actually voted Worst Match of the Year in most polls that year, and contained a 4:35 bearhug at one point, largely due to Andre's physical condition, going into the ring almost numb from his knees down due to his lower back problems, and wearing a back brace to be able to stay upright. But the show was an enormous success and most who appeared on it considered it the highlight of their careers. The Savage vs Ricky Steamboat match, where Steamboat avenged an "injury" angle to win the IC title in 14:35, was considered by many as the greatest match up to that point in company history. Piper had announced his retirement with the idea of going into the movies, and in his supposed farewell match, beat Adrian Adonis with a sleeper.

The Silverdome was sold out well in advance with more than 78,000 fans, a North American record that is intact only because the McMahons want to keep it that way. The past three Manias in a large enough stadium would have sold out even quicker. But there will never be another show that does 441,000 closed circuit buys or an 8.0 percent buy rate (roughly 400,000 buys when only five million homes in the country were equipped to get PPV). The \$1,599,000 live gate figure and \$540,000 merchandise figure blew away all the records set in Toronto. While the gate record only lasted two years, the merchandise record, like the company's paid attendance record lasted more than five years, until they ran SummerSlam from Wembley Stadium. In all, the show grossed roughly \$16.6 million and ultimately was the deciding blow in the McMahon vs. Crockett wrestling war.

The previous fall, Watts attempted to go national, but his product had been weakened by loss of talent and by being considered the third product on the national scene. He knew it was a gamble, but knew staying regional due to the nature of where things were going, he would surely be out of business. As it turned out, going national only sped up the inevitable.

Losses were mounting due to the huge costs it took to maintain the TV network he had purchased and the fact his shows weren't drawing, either in or out of his territory. He had to put talent on guaranteed deals, both because he made a major raid on former business partner Adkisson and then lost money trying to expand with that talent into Dallas, where he hoped to inevitably make his home base, and to keep from losing that talent to either McMahon or Crockett. He sold out to Crockett, who was to pay Watts \$4 million, although in the end only paid him \$1.2 million before he himself would face bankruptcy and have to sell. Jim Ross negotiated the deal for Watts, which was kept quiet enough that Bill's son Joel, a vice president of his company, as well as Watts' business partner and most high profile local promoter, Houston's Paul Boesch, were never told about any negotiations. Joel Watts found out a few days after the sale when he showed up at a TV taping in Monroe, LA and saw Crockett. Crockett then came up to tell him he had just bought his father out, but he could still keep his job.

Boesch, after hearing about the purchase, but never been officially told anything by either his former or perceived new business partner, waited for a phone call from Crockett that he felt was due him. When it didn't come after a few days, he called McMahon. Joel Watts and Bruce Prichard made

separate deals with McMahon, attempting to recruit other friends whose contracts would be voided since Crockett was not picking up Watts' wrestler contracts, just his television contracts. The key person they were talking with was Ted DiBiase, known as the best technical wrestler in the territory. Many considered him the best worker in the world at the time. DiBiase quickly became McMahon's lead heel. As it turned out, Joel Watts' tenure in WWF was short, but it ended up being the straw that broke the camel's back when it came to the family relationship, since Bill considered it the ultimate slap in the face that his son would join the company he blamed for putting him out of business. Joel had a hard time with Titan group think, such as when Hogan would come out and the place would go nuts, and they'd tell him, "Bet you've never seen a reaction like that in your life," and he'd say things like the Rock & Roll Express, Jim Duggan and Junkyard Dog were getting the same reactions, and it was just the reaction the top babyface gets when the territory is hot, which isn't what the group think wanted to hear. After Wrestlemania III, the WWE clearly had a false sense of where they stood in the big picture. At a TV taping in San Francisco at about this time, Pat Patterson told me that a few years earlier, Vince told him they'd be as big as the NFL. Well, that was no surprise, until Patterson's next words, "and now that we're bigger...."

As it turned out, many years later, Bill joined WWF and was told he was given full control over booking and decision making. His first major decision was that he thought Bret Hart, and not Shawn Michaels, should be the long-term champion and win their scheduled match at Wrestlemania. He quickly found out he not only didn't have full control, but had no control of the important decisions. Due to his bombastic nature, he was gone very quickly after realizing that. In 1987, Boesch also could never get along with McMahon, as they had entirely different concepts of wrestling fans, and more, advertised talent no-showing. After making the deal in April, Boesch promoted his final show in August. Boesch was as popular a promoter as there was in modern wrestling, and was considered something of a sympathetic figure that McMahon ran out of the city he built, but even he himself before quitting would not allow it to be categorized as that.

Just before his final show, he said that he was old enough and had been around long enough to know that you never make a deal with the devil, no matter how enticing it sounds, and he deserved no pity from anyone.

Boesch's retirement show in Houston drew a sellout 12,000 fans on August 28, 1987. At Boesch's request, Sammartino, who had only worked Houston a few times, was brought in to wrestle, even though his back was giving him fits by this time. Also brought in was Jim Duggan, who McMahon had fired months earlier when he was pulled over in a car containing drugs with rival the Iron Sheik. The thunderous crowd reactions to him at a Hogan-esque level, plus working with his favorite opponent, DiBiase, got him his job back.

With no fanfare outside the city, the next night in Baltimore would prove to be historical trivia. The two biggest stars of the pre-Austin WWF era, Hogan & Sammartino, teamed together for the first time. The unique pairing drew a sellout crowd of 12,000 as they expectedly defeated Bundy & One Man Gang. The two posed together in the ring in Hogan fashion when it was over. Few fans are aware such an event ever happened. While nothing of the sort was advertised ahead of time, it was the final time the 52-year-old Sammartino stepped into the ring

as an active competitor. He quit the company several weeks later.

Despite myths to the contrary, Wrestlemania III did not make Hogan into any bigger of a drawing card than he had already been. He was already the biggest star in the game, but it was the defining moment of his career.

Still, in 1987, Hogan only sold out Madison Square Garden, which was still the most lucrative arena in the country, once all year. He had sold out three of his six dates in 1985 (two of which were "War to Settle the Score" and "Wrestlemania") and two of six in 1986. That was even more surprising since a broken down Superstar Graham sold the building out on October 16, 1987 for a cage match with mid-level heel Butch Reed. At 44, and barely mobile due to hip and ankle problems brought on by his years of steroid use, Graham was soon moved out of the ring into managing, and then, to television announcing, before being let go. The two men who had what some would say the most heated match ever in Madison Square Garden faded away at about the same time, to no fanfare. Four years later, they were sitting next to each other on the same television stage with McMahon on the Phil Donahue show. It was one of the longest hours of McMahon's life.

After acquiring Watts' TV network and a new slew of talent and title belts in the purchase, Crockett's next step, after moving his base of operations from Charlotte to Dallas, was the prototype of how not to handle an invasion angle, a lesson strangely repeated by McMahon 14 years later. At the time, among the most passionate fans, there was always the debate over which organization had the best wrestlers, Crockett or UWF (which Mid South had been renamed before being sold). Rhodes, as booker, decided that instead of building the obvious rivalry as had been done successfully so often in Japan, he would end the controversy. Crockett mid-card wrestlers Brad Armstrong & Tim Horner quickly won the UWF tag belts. Big Bubba Rogers (who later became a huge WWF star as one of Hogan's biggest drawing rivals, The Big Bossman), who wasn't even a title contender for Flair, captured UWF's world title (although that was more to groom the UWF's biggest star, Steve Williams, but Williams' belt was never placed on a footing even equivalent to Crockett's U.S. title and before long, Williams, the UWF world champion, was gone to become a superstar in Japan). Instead of keeping the groups separate, they would run joint shows in the UWF territory, with the UWF belts defended before intermission as prelim matches, while the Crockett stars would work the main events. The feud was stillborn. There was talk that Starrcade would be a series of title unification matches, but by the time it came around, the UWF belts were worthless, and the only unification match, Crockett's TV champ Nikita Koloff, against UWF TV champ Terry Taylor, was a one-sided squash match.

Crockett then announced he was moving Starrcade out of Greensboro and Atlanta (both cities had longstanding Thanksgiving wrestling traditions dating back to the 70s), for Chicago on November 26, 1987, naming the show "Chi-town Heat." It was a terrible P.R. move, as Greensboro fans in particular never forgave him for taking Starrcade out of the building that put it on the map as the "other" biggest show of the year, and had sold it out ahead of time four years running.

After the snub, there wasn't another sellout for pro wrestling in one of its legendary arenas for another decade. But the feeling by Crockett was that his company was perceived as a

Southeast regional, and running its big show in Chicago, where his company was on fire at the time and would sellout the event in advance, would show the national audience that not only were they in the game on a national basis, but they were capable of winning the game. Crockett had signed his big talent like Flair, the Road Warriors, Lex Luger and Rhodes to huge contracts, which he had to because all were capable of making huge money if they had decided to leave for WWF, figuring the riches he'd make from PPV would cover them. Crockett and Rhodes' pitch to the talent was that Wrestlemania only came once a year up there, but they would run four to six PPV shows per year.

McMahon countered, announcing the first ever Survivor Series on the same date from Richfield, OH, a series of elimination tag matches billed as "Teams of five strive to Survive." Cable companies were thrilled at first, thinking it would be a windfall, as they could put on two events as a package deal and make more money than they did at Wrestlemania III, which was really the event that put PPV pro wrestling on the map as a huge money entity. Crockett agreed to move his show up a few hours to appease the companies, even though it was a terrible risk, since it would conflict with Thanksgiving dinner time, and many feared at that hour Chicago wouldn't even sellout, although it actually did well in advance. Crockett's show actually started three hours before McMahon's. McMahon, however, stated that any company that aired Crockett's show could not only not get his show that night, but he wouldn't allow them to carry the next Wrestlemania. McMahon's Wrestlemania was an unheard of success on PPV, rivaling all but the biggest boxing matches, so he had the power in that industry to get away with that kind of an ultimatum. Only five companies aired Crockett's show, and without the expected PPV revenue, he couldn't cover his big contracts and his expenses of maintaining the TV network. A year later, he was forced to sell to Ted Turner. As it turned out, McMahon's great triumph later became his greatest nightmare.

Survivor Series was a huge success. Trying to keep Andre and Hogan alive for a rematch at Mania, the main event saw Andre & One Man Gang & Bundy & Reed & Rick Rude win over Hogan & Bam Bam Bigelow & Ken Patera & Muraco & Orndorff (who had turned back face). Hogan was counted out late in the match, leaving Bigelow left with Andre, Bundy and Gang. Bigelow pinned Bundy and Gang, before Andre pinned him. Starrcade, surprisingly, was also not as strong a show in the ring, highlighted by Flair regaining the NWA title back from Ron Garvin, who the decision to make a transition champ proved disastrous. Garvin was a popular mid-carder, respected for being legitimately tough, and his hard chopping style led to memorable matches with Flair, whose chest was pounded bloodied and raw every night to the point it ended up getting infected, which Flair wore as a badge of courage. But when Garvin showed up on TBS with the belt after winning it in Detroit, the place went silent. It was as if the crowd, who liked Garvin chasing Flair, all of a sudden saw him as an imposter carrying Flair's belt. The two worked tag matches, where Garvin was booed in the interim, and Flair was a huge crowd favorite, even though playing heel, as he regained the title. But the night ended a great run in Chicago. Crockett was selling out his shows at the UIC Pavilion just about every time out. Starrcade was an easy sellout, weeks in advance. The big draws, along with Flair and Rhodes, were the Road Warriors. The Warriors got monster pops because they were billed from the mean streets of Chicago (even though they were actually from Minneapolis), as a modern version of earlier favorites Dick the Bruiser & The Crusher. Fans figured the two were

finally going to win the NWA world tag titles from Tully Blanchard & Arn Anderson, but instead got a Dusty screw-job finish and fans left the building furious. It wasn't the right kind of furious, which meant they would pay money to see justice served in a rematch. Crockett was never able to draw well in Chicago again.

Few remember, but even the legendary Steamboat title win over Flair in Chicago 15 months later (which was after in the same building on a PPV) only drew a paid attendance of 5,111. With paper, there were nearly 8,000 in the building, so it was close to packed, and drew a gate of \$68,700. By that point, McMahon was unable to run free shows on TV against rival PPVs or switch dates to run head-up as the cable industry decreed at least one week between shows, so his m.o. was to counter another way. He'd run loaded house shows in the same market (and when he could, in the same building) the night before the WCW PPVs. At the time, the tradition was to run PPV events on Sunday afternoons. McMahon would run the night before, and instead of the usual two-and-a-half hour house show, would keep the show going more than four hours, usually ending about 12:30 a.m. This served a dual purpose. If fans picked and chose one event, if it hurt McMahon, it was only a house show, but if it hurt WCW, they would have embarrassing empty seats for their PPV events. The fans who did attend both shows were often tired for the WCW PPV event from being out so late the night before. And casual fans had just seen so much wrestling that they would decide against buying tickets. Plus, it was hell for WCW, which couldn't even start setting up the arena for an afternoon PPV until after 1 a.m. the previous night. An example of that strategy was that weekend in February 1989, although in that case due to scheduling, McMahon actually ran two nights earlier at the Horizon with a Hogan vs. Big Bossman cage match on top, and drew a sellout 17,900 paying \$213,000.

But back to end of 1987. From the period when Garvin won the title, until he lost it, the ratings on TBS Saturday night fell from a 4.0 to a 2.8, the fastest drop in the history of the station.

Crockett, looking for revenge, planned his next PPV for right in the heart of McMahon's territory. He couldn't get Madison Square Garden, since McMahon had an exclusive seemingly for the next century. So he went to the Nassau Coliseum, on January 24, 1988, headlined by a Bunkhouse Battle Royal and Flair vs. Road Warrior Hawk, once again using the tired "Dusty finish." It was a risk, because unlike Philadelphia and Baltimore, the Crockett product had no history of doing consistent business in New York, where the loyalty to the WWF brand was like the loyalty of fans in Greensboro, Atlanta, Dallas, and Oklahoma City to their respective local brands. The show bombed live, doing only 6,000 fans paying \$80,000. McMahon countered by going to the USA Network and debuting the Royal Rumble on free television, head-to-head before a sellout of 15,000 in the former pro wrestling hotbed of Hamilton, ONT. Once again, Crockett got crushed. The Rumble drew an 8.2 rating, the largest pro wrestling rating in the history of the USA Network and a mark was never beaten on that network. Worse, Crockett was once again beaten at his strong point, since McMahon put on the better show as well.

McMahon and Hogan's next move was to conquer Hollywood. Piper was having some success, and both saw Hogan as a far bigger name than Piper. Ultimately the problem was, Hogan wasn't nearly the actor Piper was. McMahon produced a movie vehicle for Hogan called "No Holds Barred," which they were going to film in Georgia after Wrestlemania in 1988. That

movie turned out to be significant on many levels, and in ways nobody at the time could ever imagine, as it paved the way for a series of incidents that years later, nearly brought down the company.

To the fans, having to take months off for a movie meant the end of Hogan's reign as WWF champion. The success of Saturday Night's Main Event led to the biggest television event in American pro wrestling history, a live prime time special on NBC on February 5, 1988 in Indianapolis at Market Square Arena, with Hogan defending against Andre in their first rematch since Wrestlemania. A few days before the match, McMahon hired Jim Crockett's No. 2 referee, Earl Hebner, who became the most famous referee in wrestling nine years later. Dave Hebner, his twin brother, had worked as a referee, leaving Crockett for McMahon years earlier. The match wasn't much better than the first meeting. At one point Andre, who only worked a handful of matches over the previous year, collapsed in the middle of the ring losing his balance. He ended up pinning Hogan, who clearly kicked out at two, but the heel ref counted three at 9:05. The Hogan reign as champion was over after slightly more than three years. At that point, another ref, looking identical to the first ref, hit the ring. Earlier in the year they did an angle where DiBiase, the company's top heel playing Vince McMahon's alter ego, the Million Dollar Man who can buy anyone and anything he wanted, offered Hogan any amount of money for his title belt. Hogan refused. After Andre won the title, he did an interview, and forgot his only line, saying he was selling the tag team title belt to DiBiase. The show drew a 15.2 rating, which was nearly 15 million homes. While there are no conclusive records of what kind of ratings Gorgeous George and his brethren did when wrestling was a network television prime time staple in the late 40s and early 50s, the average rating was nowhere near that level. That was almost double the rating and audience of the highest rated episode of Raw during its television heyday. Without any question, more people saw the Andre-Hogan rematch than any wrestling match ever in North America. Most likely, it is another record that will never be broken.

The storyline was that DiBiase paid for a henchman to have plastic surgery and look just like referee Dave Hebner in his plan to steal the title from Hogan. Jack Tunney, who played figurehead commissioner, ruled that DiBiase couldn't buy the title, and since Andre won it illegally and had sold it, he couldn't have it either. It would be put up in a one-night tournament at Wrestlemania IV on March 27, 1988 at Trump Plaza in Atlantic City. And, he decreed, Hogan and Andre would meet in the first round.

The plan all along was for DiBiase to win the championship, hold it for a year, and then lose it to a returning Hogan at Wrestlemania V. Savage, who had become the company's No. 2 babyface after a turn, was scheduled to win the IC title on the live special from Honky Tonk Man. As is a well known story, Honky Tonk Man refused to do the job, so Savage won via count out. Over the next week, the decision was made to go with Savage, and not DiBiase, with the idea that Hogan would help Savage win, celebrate with him, and there would be an instance where he would touch Elizabeth (Savage's real-life wife at the time and TV manager) in a way that could be taken wrong. Because of the involvement of Elizabeth, the feeling was Savage was a better choice for the role long-term. Hogan would never challenge the face Savage for the belt after his return and they would tag team on big shows. Just before Mania, Savage would go heel, and Hogan would beat him for the belt. This was all planned nearly 14 months ahead.

Desperate for revenge after the Thanksgiving debacle, Crockett and Turner scheduled a live television special called "Clash of the Champions," for free, going head-to-head with Mania, from the Greensboro Coliseum.

The first ever pro wrestling "Super Sunday" was a huge victory for Crockett, although the joy was short-lived. The Clash was the show of the year, headlined by Flair creating a new superstar in one night in previous mid-carder Sting, after going to a 45:00 draw for the NWA title in a bout that was named Match of the Year. The show drew a 5.8 rating and 13 share, the largest number for wrestling in years on the station and a number that Nitro in prime time never equaled. In a weaker time slot, the share topped that of the first Rumble. The main event drew a 7.1 over 45 minutes, peaking with a 7.8 quarter hour, the latter being the highest quarter hour in the history of wrestling on TBS. Because more homes at the time got TBS than USA (or for that matter MTV years earlier when Hogan and Piper wrestled), the Flair-Sting match was actually the most viewed match up to that point in history ever on cable television. Wrestlemania was hardly a financial flop, as the cable universe nearly doubled over that year. Even though the buy rate was down 30% from the first Hogan-Andre match, a record 585,000 homes purchased the show.

But the atmosphere at Trump Plaza for Mania was death. From that standpoint, it was possibly the worst Mania of them all. Hogan and Andre were both disqualified in just 5:22 of their first round match, and many of the fans left halfway through the show. Savage went through Butch Reed, Greg Valentine, One Man Gang and finally DiBiase, with Hogan's help in the final, and the two posed together with Savage as new champion. The first Hogan reign was over.

An Observer poll at the time saw 91.9% of respondents say Clash was a better show and 7.3% went with Wrestlemania. If anything, those numbers were generous to McMahon.

But the cable industry, as a whole, was mad at Crockett and Turner, who was the most powerful man in that industry at the time. The belief was that running the free show opposite Wrestlemania cost them millions, as it did McMahon. They didn't care that it was only retaliation or what the nuances were of a pro wrestling war. Turner was told in no uncertain terms, never to do it again. Ironically, nearly a year later, those same people asked him to do it again.

Many thought things could be shaky for WWF. The company had been built around Hogan, who was on the sidelines. Sting seemed like the next big thing in wrestling. The other person who had been tabbed by many at the time as Hogan's successor, younger, more athletic and better physique, Lex Luger, was also on the other side, although people never took into account his lack of personality. And while Savage was an even better athlete than Flair, he was not larger than life in the way of Hogan, and night-in-and-night out wasn't in Flair's league as a performer. And when he won the title, it was clearly Hogan, not Savage, in the spotlight. Plus, WWF had a history going on three years that business went way down after Wrestlemania.

The WWF title had just turned 25 years old. The 35-year-old Savage was only the 11th man in history ever to hold the title (ten by most records at the time since the 1979 Antonio Inoki quickie reign was never acknowledged by the WWF until recent years). At about 230 pounds at the time, jacked up from about 180 pounds during his baseball playing days as Randy

Poffo, he was the son of veteran Chicago area star Angelo Poffo. Savage was far the most athletic champion and most modern style worker that had ever touched the belt, or would see it, for a few years.

Surprisingly, Savage and DiBiase's rematches did far better business than any of Hogan's post-Mania programs had done, leading the company to its best summer since the expansion. Crockett failed to capitalize on Sting's new-found popularity, and was turning wrestlers so often and providing screw-job main event finishes with such frequency that fans were losing interest.

While wrestling fans focused on those issues in the ring, historically, something far more important was going on. Hogan and McMahon were in Atlanta making the movie "No Holds Barred." At 41, McMahon, a long-time bodybuilder, who actually seemed to enjoy talking about bodybuilding more than wrestling, was getting frustrated with his battles with aging. While he had big arms, his natural genetics for bodybuilding weren't that good that no matter how hard he trained, he couldn't seem to overcome them and look like the wrestlers he promoted. Dr. George Zahorian, Hogan's steroid supplier, was shipping Hogan packages to make him and everyone else who needed to be, larger than life, to Atlanta, for the movie. According to testimony in his 1994 trial, it was at that point that Hogan finally convinced McMahon, as the two often trained together, to take start taking steroids. It was a decision that made McMahon as big as his wrestlers, but also, nearly brought down everything he had worked for, for six years later. When the movie was released, that did nobody any favors because suddenly Hogan became the object of derision rather than awe. But while he never made it as a big movie star, unlike the Rock more than a decade later, his departures for Hollywood to try didn't hurt his drawing power among wrestling fans.

JUNE 9, 2003

Coming off the famed "Super Sunday" on March 27, 1988, the national pro wrestling war, at the time between Vince McMahon's WWF and Jim Crockett Promotion, was at a high.

It seemed to be a great time for the top talent, because the biggest names became huge pawns in this war and it drove salaries up to new levels. After getting thrashed head-to-head by McMahon at almost every turn, Crockett achieved at least a figurative win. He had by far the better show, and had created someone who many thought would be the superstar of the 90s in Sting. He also had Lex Luger, who in 1988, was considered by a frightening number of people to be the heir apparent to Hulk Hogan as the biggest money player in the game. But the win, in costing McMahon and the cable industry millions by putting a free major show opposite Wrestlemania, didn't help Crockett's bottom line much, even with it drawing the largest audience ever to see wrestling on the SuperStation.

Overall, 1988 was not a good year for Crockett. He was informed early in the year by his accountant that the company was going broke. From most accounts, it hit him out of nowhere. They were riding high at the time, going all over the country. Some nights they were doing good business, and others they weren't. Crockett, like McMahon would years later, purchased a private jet to transport himself and his biggest

stars like The Four Horsemen and Dusty Rhodes around the country. The cost of this was ridiculous. Crockett had moved his company out of its long-time home in Charlotte, to Dallas, and wanted all the talent to move as well. Few did. Charlotte was a friendly environment for his troupe of wrestlers. While they were not doing the kind of grosses McMahon was in the big markets, per capita, considering the population, the Carolinas had become a temporary gold mine. Most of the cities they went to didn't have major league pro sports franchises, so the wrestlers, while not getting credit in the local media, were the local sports stars. Then the bottom dropped quickly.

There were a lot of basic problems. In those days, the cable shows, like the TBS Saturday and Sunday shows, were considered the "star makers." By being in the Atlanta TV studio every Saturday morning on shows that as often as not, depending on who was hot that particular month, were beating McMahon's USA Network shows, as cable expanded, the Carolinas stars became national stars. But in those days, to draw people to the arenas, which made up the bulk of the company's revenue, you needed local syndication. At this point they were taping the equivalent of four first-run hours a week in syndication, and two more on cable. Unlike McMahon, who in those days would do three weeks worth of shows on successive days, Crockett would do two hours per shot, which meant three TV shoots per week—one for cable, one for his existing syndication, usually taped in the Carolinas, and another for the UWF network, usually taped in that part of the country. They generally offered bloodier, faster paced and more competitive matches. While fewer in numbers, the crowds at the syndicated tapings, usually done in small or mid-sized arenas, were hotter than McMahon's. Crockett believed in his heart when the country would compare the two products, in the long run, he'd win. And even if he didn't, with PPV making it possible to make millions, and a TV network that rivaled McMahon's once he got the UWF stations, ad sales alone should bring the company to new levels.

McMahon did a number on his PPV plans, costing him millions he was counting on, and making him unable to make the balloon payments in the big money contracts like those of Lex Luger and Ric Flair, who were earning \$500,000 and \$700,000 apiece. Even though "The Wrestling Network," as Crockett sold his syndicated package to sponsors, drew combined viewership of all shows close to McMahons (and sometimes better), and higher than all but a few shows that were nationally syndicated at the time, advertisers didn't care. He didn't come close to the ad revenues he projected when he bought the company. McMahon was presenting Madison Avenue wrestling, with the celebrity tie-ins and larger than life Hulk Hogan. Crockett was trying to sell the idea of better wrestling matches, which advertisers felt appealed to the more stereotypical Southern redneck audience, which was also an audience most major advertisers believed were not worth going after. The perception problem was huge. Crockett's house shows were also falling fast.

A fundamental tenant of regional wrestling was turnover of talent. While most areas had their local legends, much of the big name talent would spend their careers going from territory to territory. The top names would usually start in the middle, unless they were the handful of instant main event draws, and win consistently all the way to the top. When they got there, they either sank or swam, and would stay as long as the local promoter could deal with them or the fans would pay to see them.

McMahon, signing talent to long-term exclusive contracts, changed that dynamic. Crockett had no choice but to follow suit or he would lose his talent. What kept both companies strong at the time is that each had the ability to make new stars, and would work in new faces to keep the matches on top fresh. But after a few strong years Crockett's talent, particularly the clique on top, started getting stale. Crockett was afraid to let anyone go, because he'd be handing McMahon a new superstar, and it worked both ways. Rhodes, who did a brilliant job in 1985 and 1986 in making new stars, attempted to keep talent fresh by turning people, but that also started running its course. But even in those years, it was evident to see Rhodes was running so many angles that fans were getting spoiled, like junkies needing a bigger and bigger hit to get off, and that he was going to run dry. The purchase of the UWF ended up being that era's equivalent of McMahon's garnering the remnants of WCW and ECW. There was so much of a belief that the stars on our team were always better, that the new wrestlers, who actually came at the perfect time because the top badly needed freshening, were squandered, treated like stepchildren, and before long, almost all of them were gone. With two exceptions, one major.

Steve Borden was a good looking big bodybuilder in Southern California in 1985. Rick Bassman, who now runs UPW, but at the time was an outsider in wrestling trying to get in, had a concept. The idea was simple enough. The Road Warriors were getting huge crowd reactions at the time and were the business' hottest new act since Hogan exploded. To this day people debate whether that was good, because the Road Warriors' act as heels was based on not selling, and while it was tremendous at getting them over, it was devastating to the credibility of their opponents. The first two territories they worked, Georgia and the AWA, both collapsed after they left as they destroyed the credibility of so many of their opponents. While they didn't cause this, as the whole business was changing, fans were less willing to accept wrestlers without big bodies as serious stars.

Even though booked as heels at first, fans ended up loving them. They almost never did jobs and sold very little during their matches. While not as tall or quite as heavy, they were more muscular and powerful looking than Hogan, and gave the aura of being more real. In those days, fans looked at wrestling far less as entertainment and while virtually all knew it was a work, liked to get behind people who they thought in a real fight would kick everyone's ass. While business insiders knew of stories like Ronnie Garvin backstage putting Hawk in a hold and him being unable to move, or street fighting stories of Haku, or of the legitimate toughness of Steve Williams, to most fans, they believed, nobody was tougher than the Road Warriors if it was real. And while that is of almost no concern today, it was a big deal then. Like with Hogan a few years ago while working for Verne Gagne, the fans had turned them babyface.

It was natural fans would get behind them as they laughed when the babyfaces' moves were ineffective. Old-line promoters, like Verne Gagne, were having a tough time because of the belief that the babyfaces selling and selling should build sympathy for the big comeback. Bassman would watch them on TV and had an idea. In Southern California, the mecca for bodybuilding, a world where there was little money for the athletes, he'd see guys just like the Road Warriors in the gym. It was the simplest of concepts, Hogan or Sgt. Slaughter U.S. patriotism, dubbed "Power Team USA," with babyface clones of the Road Warriors. Unlike today, where a

big bodybuilder needs more than just muscles to make it, the public's fascination with bodybuilders in wrestling was at its height.

Borden and Jim Hellwig, a former Mr. Georgia, were recruited by Bassman along with a couple of trivia names, Mark Miller and Garland Donnoho, who never made it. The funniest part of the story is that when Bassman put together his concept, neither Hellwig nor Borden were part of it. He had designed four different characters, an African-American, a Hispanic, a blond-haired All-American and a native American. Miller was the Hispanic, Donnoho was the African American. Ed Brock, a native of Hawaii, was the native American and Jerry Botbyl was the blond haired All-American. Botbyl and Bassman had a blow up quickly. At the time they were doing most of their training in Reseda, CA and doing weight training at the local Gold's Gym. Borden was the guy working behind the counter when Botbyl quit (he actually later worked very briefly for the AWA under the name Jerry America, although almost nobody remembers him), and Bassman thought he'd be perfect for the part. Borden had watched a little wrestling growing up, but wasn't a fan, and had zero interest. Bassman spent two months trying to convince him otherwise, and finally, he gave it a shot. Brock decided he didn't want it. Ed Connors, the owner of Gold's Gym in Venice, CA, heard there was an opening and put Bassman and Hellwig together, and Hellwig started his career with the idea he was going to play a Native American patriotic character.

Hellwig and Borden started training for a few weeks under Red Bastien and Billy Anderson. They quickly split with Bassman, left camp, sent some photos out which caught the attention of Jerry Jarrett, and started their careers in Memphis in November of 1985, with no idea how to wrestle. They worked there for a few weeks, made no money, and got a lot of notice in wrestling. They were huge by the standard of the time, which is what got them the notice. They were also so green it wasn't even funny. While green bodybuilders were becoming standard in wrestling in that era, most had at least enough training to be able to functionally stand there and let the good workers bounce off them. These guys couldn't even do that, but the success of Hogan led people to think muscular freaks were it. Literally, there was nobody in the business at that time even remotely as bad as those two. Jarrett named the team The Freedom Fighters. Borden was called Justice. That didn't work fast. They were quickly turned heel in an attempt to salvage them, as The Blade Runners, Rock (Hellwig) and Sting. Although they didn't succeed and were out of Memphis pretty fast, bodies in those days meant potential, and they moved up to Mid South Wrestling. It led to a big argument between owner Bill Watts and one of his biggest stars, Dick Murdoch. To make room for the two, Watts fired Kelly Kiniski. Kiniski, the son of wrestling legend Gene Kiniski, had been a West Texas State football star and was popular among the boys because he had been a good football player, the older wrestlers knew and respected his dad, and he was a good technical performer. He also had no look, nor charisma. Murdoch was furious about him losing his job, but Watts asked Murdoch who he thought would draw more money. The two had a different answer and Murdoch was gone. They were put under the tutelage of Eddie Gilbert, an undersized third generation wrestler who ate and drank the business from childhood to an early death. They improved, one faster than the other. Hellwig would complain to Gilbert when the Blade Runners were put in a program with company owner Bill Watts, who was in his late 40s. Hellwig couldn't grasp why the two had to bump like crazy when punched by an old man, and Gilbert's explanation that he was

the local hero didn't sink in to someone who lived for bodybuilding. Borden's career went another direction. With his name shortened to Sting, he dropped weight to emphasize a combination of power and agility, as he was naturally a good leaper. He kept the face point, and started teaming with Gilbert and another muscular newcomer, Rick Steiner, as Hot Stuff International, and made solid strides in the ring. Gilbert took a liking to Sting, and told people quickly, he was going to be the next big star in the industry and would be a good worker, despite the image nearly everyone had of the Blade Runners from their untrained beginnings. He then turned him babyface, and Sting started howling to the crowd after he'd do a big move. Gilbert was so proud of Sting, but he had the misfortune of the UWF pedigree after the sale of the company to Crockett. Shortly after his turn, he was jobbing to Black Bart, an Crockett mid-carder. While most of the UWF guys were being starved out, Rhodes also saw potential in Sting, and he was offered a \$52,000 a year contract.

At the Starrcade in 1987 that McMahon blocked most of the country from seeing, Sting was in the opening match, teaming with Michael Hayes & Jimmy Garvin in a time limit draw against Gilbert & Steiner & Larry Zbyszko. At Crockett's second PPV that McMahon thwarted by putting on the Royal Rumble, he was in a dark match. It was just three months later when he stepped into the ring in his career making match. When Flair vs. Sting for the NWA title was announced for the first Clash of the Champions, head up with Wrestlemania, Sting, by today's terminology, seemed destined to be a mid-card babyface who was about to hit his head on the glass ceiling. But instead of Flair winning the long, hard-fought match, usually by holding the tights or using the ropes, as was Flair's m.o. in those days against mid-card faces, they went 45:00 to a draw. Rhodes, who was still the booker, in those days never met a world title main event that he didn't want a screw job ending in. Even after a career making classic match, the last taste was unsatisfying. They announced three judges would decide the winner. The *Playboy* Pet of the year, Patty Mullen, voted for Flair, with the idea given she did so because Flair had either bribed her or was doing her. Gary Juster, a house show promoter, voted for Sting. Sandy Scott, a respected former wrestler and current road agent for Crockett, voted a draw. Think about that. They had judges to avoid a draw if they went the time limit, and it was still a draw. Sitting at the table with the three was a child actor, brought in as a celebrity. The small actor a few years earlier did a short-lived TV series where he played the son of Terry Funk. His name was Jason Hervey, who at that time played the arrogant older brother of Fred Savage on "The Wonder Years," and years later would end up as one of Eric Bischoff's best friend, and play a part in changing the course of wrestling history himself when the connection between the two helped land Bischoff the job of Executive Vice President of the company years later.

Wrestling is a strange mistress, because its ebbs and flows of business are enough to drive people to drink and drugs, if the lifestyle itself didn't lend into that direction. After the record-setting Clash audience, the word got to Ted Turner that Crockett was running deeply in debt. Turner had an affinity for wrestling since it put his station on the map a decade earlier when, in the infancy of cable, his weekend wrestling shows were the first shows in cable history to routinely draw more than a million households, at a time when only 18 million homes were wired for the station. The Flair-Sting match was the first match to top three million homes. Crockett's next big event, the Crockett Cup tag team tournament, won by Sting & Lex Luger over Tully Blanchard & Arn Anderson, only drew

8,500 fans to the Greensboro Coliseum. It was a huge disappointment at the time, and put the sale into high gear.

However, on July 10, 1988, in Baltimore, Crockett finally got his real PPV. They had a McMahon-quality PPV main event with Luger getting his first shot with Crockett at Flair's title. The cable industry had laid out a doctrine to both sides after Mania, and there was to be no more sabotage. Well, except internally. By this point, both Maryland and Pennsylvania's athletic commissions had banned blading in pro wrestling matches, and Maryland stopped matches at the first sign of blood. A deal was worked out ahead of time, where the commission worked with the promotion on the finish, since the commission itself got to go over. Luger would blade, which he had almost always balked at doing, make a comeback, and put Flair in the torture rack. The bell would ring and people would think it was the title change. But no, it was an offshoot on the fake title change finish that had been done so frequently in Flair's main events that it had devastated house show business. The commission would rule that because Luger was bleeding, the match, by commission rules, had to be stopped. It was made worse in execution, as Luger's blood was barely noticeable, and NWA fans, used to bloodbaths, had to have been upset.

When the tombstone of Luger's career is written, nearly everyone in wrestling will say that nobody got paid more or pushed harder who never drew a dime. Nobody ever got paid more on undelivered potential. It is true Luger's career never came close to what everyone was projecting for him from day one, and nobody certainly could foresee the end result of his life. But there was a time that Luger was hot on a national basis and he drew. It was his first babyface run, after breaking from the Four Horseman (which opened the slot for Barry Windham to go heel). It was Arn Anderson's job every night to put over Luger, who immediately became the company's hottest babyface, to get him ready for the big money program with Flair.

The Bash drew a sellout of 13,000 and \$208,000, although at the time, anything but a sellout for the first Flair-Luger match would have been considered a disaster. The negative is that both Crockett and Turner Broadcasting, who were partners in the PPV show, saw Starrcade in five markets do a 3.3 percent buy rate. While McMahon ran Survivor Series head-to-head and did double that, there was no place in the country where both shows were available. Based on that, and that this was a match people were wanting to see, and not Ron Garvin vs. Flair, they expected a buy rate of 3.5 to 4.0, which in those days would have been 260,000 to 300,000 buys. Wrestlemania had just done 485,000 buys with free TV competition. Where they miscalculated is that four of the five markets Starrcade ran in were Crockett-friendly markets in the Carolinas, as well as Atlanta (the only exception being San Jose, because the local system, knowing full well it was costing them money, said it wouldn't back down on its commitment to the Crockett show, since Crockett announced his date first, even though the other 210 of the 215 or so major cable outlets at the time all did). On its first show without competition or sabotage with national clearance, with TBS marketing behind them and a ton of publicity, they did 190,000 buys. While TV ratings and house show attendance at the time said otherwise, they were much farther behind than they had imagined.

The forgotten part of history was, the Flair-Luger finish, as bad as it sounds and as botched as it was executed, worked. Even though Sting was more popular than Luger, he was more like Rob Van Dam, a cool guy they liked, but nobody they expected

to actually win the title at the time. His title challenges after the Clash match drew only decently. Flair did a program with Steve Williams (who was considered UWF champion, even though they had stopped mentioning the title that he had never lost), which did even worse. Luger had been groomed as the next big thing, and people bought his challenges and believed they might see a title change. They went all over the country with Flair-Luger rematches from Baltimore, and it was drawing. Richmond and Philadelphia sold out, Atlanta (which had fallen as low as 1,800 a few months earlier) and Norfolk came close, and almost all the smaller Carolinas cities went clean. In Charlotte, they drew 16,000 fans, which was the third largest crowd in the history of the city. The rest of the Crockett family saw that as a sign, and started opposing Jim's negotiations to sell the family business, which held things up, but only slightly, when they realized if they didn't sell and kept the company much longer, their family would lose all the money their father had made from the half-century old business. With the strong advances, the company took out two loans in excess of \$300,000 to meet certain payroll and television station obligations to avoid losing its network, with the idea the money would be repaid out of the sale price. But after another screw-job of Flair being DQ'd in all the markets, business for rematches fell to just above normal levels. Stress levels, on the other hand, were way above normal. Rhodes took the brunt of the heat, and deservedly so. Like almost any booker, he pushed himself far beyond what he should have. He was 42, and overweight. He was more and more limited in the ring, but booked himself against great heels who would hide his weaknesses. The main heel group, the Four Horseman, at this point composed of Flair, Blanchard, Barry Windham and Arn Anderson, got more frustrated as time went on. In September, Blanchard & Anderson quit before a show in Philadelphia, with Anderson, drinking heavily, but came back in the ring and were professional enough to lose the tag titles to Jim Cornette's Midnight Express. Next stop for them was WWF. A few weeks later, the deal with Turner was closed for approximately \$9 million, with the Crockett family retaining a minor interest (which years later was bought out) and all getting jobs with the new organization. David Crockett was given an executive job on the television side, while Jackie Crockett remained as a camera man on the television show. Jim expected to be run the wrestling division under Turner, but the company had other plans. He ended up with one of those consulting jobs where he was never consulted with much.

WWF, with Hogan on the sidelines all summer filming the movie "No Holds Barred," actually had its best summer since the expansion, built around a main program of new champion Randy Savage vs. Ted DiBiase, in rematches of the Wrestlemania title tournament final. The company, coming off the Mania debacle, was out for blood. They wanted a window to avoid confusion in the marketplace in PPV. The idea was that they wanted no pro wrestling PPV events a few months before, and for a month after, all of their shows. With a few shows per year, the idea was to make that avoiding confusion be a way of shutting out Crockett, or Turner, for good. It may have even worked if it was just Crockett, since his track record of drawing couldn't touch McMahon's, but Turner was far too powerful in the cable industry for that to fly.

But it did lead to the creation of a third major annual event, SummerSlam, which debuted on August 29, 1988 in Madison Square Garden. Hogan returned just before the show, to hype a match, teaming with Savage over DiBiase & Andre the Giant with Jesse Ventura as referee in the match where Elizabeth, as the secret weapon, dropped her dress and walked around in a

bikini bottom, stunning DiBiase & Andre, and caused them to lose. The post-match celebration saw another major tease, as Savage gave Hogan a jealous glare, which was another step in the year-long cooking program to build for their first match at Wrestlemania. The show drew a sellout of nearly 20,000 fans paying \$355,345, and another 500,000 buys on PPV.

Earlier in the show, Ultimate Warrior won the IC title a second time

from Rick Rude. Warrior was getting crowd reactions that rivaled Hogan, and while not at Hogan's level, was doing exceptional merchandise business. When he was put in the top spot as IC champ at house shows, crowds were better than one would have expected on non-Hogan shows (which meant no world title main event). In reality, Warrior was McMahon's best example of emphasizing someone's strengths and hiding his weaknesses. He was literally nothing more than a great body with a well choreographed ring entrance, cool music, cool look, sprinting to the ring (which the Road Warriors actually started), a lot of shaking the ropes (which, when he first started, the agents told him was stupid, but the crowds went wild and it stuck), and usually short matches. Not only was he protected in short matches, but also on finishes. It wasn't some great innovation either, as McMahon's father had taken some big limited men and made them drawing cards, and Dusty Rhodes had done such a great job of hiding and protecting Nikita Koloff that he once drew 27,000 fans at Charlotte Stadium against Flair, and remained a viable main eventer for years afterwards. In his entire WWF tenure up to that point, he was only pinned once, by Rude in the bout in which Rude won the IC title from him. And that was with outside interference of Bobby Heenan, and was designed only to build up Warrior regaining the title at SummerSlam and lengthen their arena program since there was so few guys he could work on top with. With the exception of great bump taking heels like Rude and Mr. Perfect (Curt Hennig), it was almost impossible to get a decent match out of him.

Even though most considered Perfect the best worker of the two best friends and high school classmates, Rude's style meshed with Warrior's better, plus he was also very muscular, making for another good dynamic, so the company did what was needed to keep the program going. A year earlier at the SummerSlam where Elizabeth pulled off her skirt, Warrior won the IC belt for the first time, from Honky Tonk Man, in just 31 seconds. It worked because Honky was also limited in the ring, and doing a long match wouldn't have done anyone any good. In those days, that title meant the top guy in the company with the exception of Hogan and whomever he was working with in the main program.

WWF's business was so strong that many nights they were running four different crews. Hogan (or his understudy, Jim Duggan, who would headline in the smaller markets Hogan wouldn't work) led one crew, Savage led another, and they had "C" and "D" shows to hit small markets. The key to the "D" shows in particular was to work with local groups as fund raisers. WWF was flying high, and these shows, usually with the building taken care of by the local group, were no risk events. They also put another nail in the coffin of the smaller regional groups that were around. If a local group in Alabama wanted to sponsor a wrestling show, WWF was too big, so they'd go to Ron Fuller, the local promoter. At the time, these types of shows were very prevalent. With WWF on the hunt for these dates, local groups didn't bother with their local promotions.

Savage's main opponents in late 1989 were Andre (always doing DQ finishes) and Badnews Brown (Allan Coage, the 1976 Olympic bronze medalist in judo). By the latter part of the year, particularly when Hogan came back, Savage's program was not pushed as much as Hogan's, and by the standards, he was drawing just okay. Hogan came back for a program with the Big Bossman, a rising star with Crockett under the name Big Bubba Rogers who was an incredible creation of Rhodes and Jim Cornette's, who left for money reasons. Rogers had proven he could draw already, as he and Rhodes a few years earlier had done big business. With his new gimmick, he gave Hogan a beat down with his night stick gimmick, and even without the belt, he and Hogan were packing them in. But as was the case whenever things got too successful, McMahon was branching into new ventures. Besides the movie was the world of boxing. McMahon paid a reported \$9.5 million for the PPV rights to a boxing match between Sugar Ray Leonard, who had been a de la Hoya level draw a few years earlier, in a comeback fight against Donny Lalonde, who was never a big name boxer. McMahon promoted the fight like it was Wrestlemania on his wrestling telecasts, and while he proclaimed it a big PPV success afterwards, it was almost certainly not. It was the last boxing match McMahon would ever promote.

WCW was in total disarray as the sale broke. Rhodes and Flair were on the warpath when Turner executive Jack Petrik took over the wrestling division on December 1, 1988, starting a 12 plus year run of a few major highs and far more legendary incompetence. Petrik discovered wrestling as a big deal when, working as a television executive, he got a job with Ch. 30 in St. Louis in the mid-70s. He quickly learned that wrestling was huge in the city, as the wrestling show was often pulling a 60 share in its time slot. He first put wrestling from Detroit on, but the show was horrible and drew no ratings. He tried to get another show in, but found something very strange. No wrestling promoter that had a decent show would let their show be put on. He quickly found out the power Sam Muchnick, who was no longer NWA president, but still its most respected promoter, held in the business. Petrik met with Muchnick to try and get his show, but Muchnick had a longstanding relationship with KPLR-TV, where he was friends with the owner and the General Manager, and wouldn't consider a move. But he brokered a deal. He called Vince McMahon Sr. and said he could get the WWF TV tape for the station, but the deal was McMahon Sr. would send the tape to Muchnick, not the station. The deal was that Muchnick would insert commercials and interviews building up his own house on the tape, so his shows were pushed on two stations in the same market.

While in St. Louis, Petrik became friends with Jim Herd. Herd was a former college football player, who worked at KPLR-TV in the early 70s and worked as both director and head of production on Muchnick's "Wrestling at the Chase" show. It was a huge shock when, in 1972, after an opening, Herd became general manager of the station. While Muchnick was personal friends with the station's owner, Hal Prodder, and knew Herd well, he took Herd into the secret circle of St. Louis sports. Muchnick, Bob Bowen (the trainer for the baseball Cardinals), Bob Burns (sports editor of the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*) and Bob Broeg (a sports columnist with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, who was considered one of the great sportswriters of the 20th century) formed the 1-2-3 Club and had lunch every Monday. All the movers and shakers in the local sports scene, from Jack Buck, the city's most famous sportscaster, to Ben Kerner, who owned local major league

sports franchises, were there every Monday where the big deals got done. It also helped Herd get a job briefly with the NHL's St. Louis Blues.

Herd wasn't successful as the station general manager, and worked several jobs over the next 15 years, including a stint as a banking executive. At the time Petrik was handed control of a wrestling company, Herd was a vice president with Pizza Hut. Petrik only knew two people that were involved in the business from his stay in St. Louis, Herd and Muchnick.

While Herd knew the St. Louis wrestling personalities like Pat O'Connor and Dick the Bruiser, and knew a little about wrestling, he had the outsider mentality that it was cowboys and Indians and you come up with wacky gimmicks, even though Muchnick did a very different product. When it was first approached to Herd that a good early move would be to woo Ricky Steamboat out of retirement, he didn't even know the name since Steamboat's career hadn't started when Herd was involved in the business.

Muchnick, who was 83 by this time, had retired years earlier but had maintained friendships with many in wrestling. After his wife died, he had lost his fire and retired, and had no interest in coming back full-time, but still got a kick out of being in the thick of things. He recommended his protege, Larry Matysik, to be the booker. But before he was hired, Jim Barnett talked Herd out of it, saying Matysik wasn't a booker. Technically, when Matysik and Muchnick arranged programs in the late 70s, the booker of record was always O'Connor, who also had input. Herd was talked into hiring Bob Windham, a huge wrestler best known as Blackjack Mulligan. Windham came to work for two days, and apparently seeing the future, never came back. Rhodes, who booked Crockett into oblivion and was hated by nearly everyone, had no idea of what was going on. He was still at war with Flair and just wanted the title off him. When the dust settled in January 1989, the man chosen was George Scott. Scott had a hell of a resume as a booker. He was Crockett's man in the 70s when the regional outlet running in smaller markets became per capita probably the top promotion in the country. He took a crew-cut AWA job guy recommended by Wahoo McDaniel, told him to watch Buddy Rogers tapes, and made him Nature Boy Ric Flair. He tried to make Greg Valentine a copy of his father. He filled the ranks with solid veterans. He brought in a Half-Japanese, Half-American named Richard Blood who had more potential than almost any wrestler that had come along in years, and tried to recreate a famous Hawaiian babyface of a generation earlier, Sammy Steamboat. One night on television in 1977, Blood pinned Flair, the company's most charismatic star, and in one night, Ricky Steamboat became the newest wrestling superstar. Scott was also the booker for McMahon when he first went national, until losing a power play to Hogan and Pat Patterson. He resurfaced in Dallas for Fritz Von Erich, but time seemed to pass him by. His eventful reign was best remembered for how he used Barn Barn Bigelow. The 380-pound Bigelow, whose tattooed forehead and coming off the top ropes at that size were things unheard of in wrestling, had gotten a decent amount of national publicity before ever turning pro due to a Studio 54 publicist who wanted to get into wrestling that was his friend, named Paul Heyman. In his first territory, Jerry Lawler made him look like Bruiser Brody crossed with Jimmy Snuka. Scott made him a Russian named Crusher Yurkov.

The Turner people knew little, but the people they were listening to were big on Flair as the key player. While it is not

known publicly, had Flair jumped to WWF, and that was not all that far from happening at the time, the decision had been made by Turner to pull out of the deal. It was only a few weeks into the run when Flair was about to jump again. Starrcade on December 26, 1988, had long been scheduled to be a conclusive Flair-Luger match. Rhodes, who was still the booker, wanted the title off Flair, and wanted him gone. He then wanted to force the issue, and changed plans. Flair was told he would be losing to Rick Steiner in a 5:00 squash match. While that wasn't as ridiculous then as it sounds today, as Steiner was strong enough to be booked as a singles opponent for Flair at many arena shows at the time, this wasn't business talking. Steiner was going to be put in Luger's spot as a shooter, but not to hurt Flair necessarily, but only in the event he wouldn't cooperate. Rhodes didn't trust Flair in the ring with Luger, but knew Flair would never try anything with Steiner, who was considered the toughest guy in the company. When Flair heard this new plan, he quit. Herd went to Matysik about this disaster that was happening. Matysik told him, above all, Flair vs. Luger was the best business match for Starrcade, and since they had yet to do a pinfall finish after five months of working all over the country, Flair, whose credibility as champion had been shot by Rhodes' booking, desperately needed a win. Herd told Rhodes that Flair vs. Luger would be the main event, and that Flair was going over clean. This led to Rhodes wanting out as booker. But to make things more dramatic, Rhodes booked an angle where the Road Warriors, who he had turned heel, would put a spike in his eye and he would blade. The new Turner management had ruled there would be no blood on their wrestling shows. Rhodes was fired as booker, and in an unrelated story, another long-time headliner, Nikita Koloff, quit. As it turned out, Flair didn't want to win clean, and got the pin in 30:59 with his feet on the ropes. It was considered a bad sign when the match drew 10,000 fans and \$150,000, failing to sellout the Scope in Norfolk for the company's biggest show, and did 140,000 buys on PPV.

It didn't take long for McMahon and Turner to hook up. Steamboat, who was Flair's favorite opponents, was sitting on the sidelines after quitting McMahon, in one of his many pro wrestling retirements. Herd had never even heard of Steamboat two months earlier when Matysik brought up his name as someone on the sidelines who could help the company. When Scott got the job, since he was friends with Steamboat and gave him his first break and in return, Steamboat gave Scott the best matches in the country and his most successful program, it was natural they'd hook up. Steamboat wasn't sure how much he wanted to wrestle, and both sides agreed to a six month deal, where Steamboat would get the NWA title, something he'd never held, and they would go from there. On January 6, 1989, the TBS studios were the site of two weeks worth of tapings for the Saturday night WCW television show. Barry Windham was wrestling Eddie Gilbert, when Flair ran in to attack Gilbert for a DQ. Gilbert wanted a tag match, and said he had a mystery partner. Steamboat came out and pinned Flair in one of the best television matches in years. This led to matches that many of today's wrestlers, who saw while growing up, would rank as the greatest matches ever held, and sequences from the bouts have been copied on shows big and small ever since that time.

On and off from 1977 until Steamboat's departure to WWF about eight years later, the two would feud in the Carolinas, and it is generally believed to have been the biggest money feud in the history of the territory. While Steamboat was a far better wrestler by this point, his marketability was down. Steamboat was an incredible 25-year-old babyface in the late

70s. He had almost movie star looks, a great physique, quickness and athletic ability, great stamina, and was nothing short of an incredible worker. He and Flair defined what was great wrestling then, and were about to redefine it again. But while almost every wrestler loved working with Steamboat, because he was so unselfish in the ring and, like Flair, could make mediocre wrestlers look like world beaters, he lacked in losing the youthful babyface charisma he had. He was 36 years old, and in great shape for his age, but not the heavily roided look so many had at the time. His gimmick was he was a family man, bringing his wife and young son to ringside at his big matches.

While few fans were aware of it, from a business standpoint, it is almost impossible to talk about Steamboat without bringing up his wife, Bonnie. A former model, Bonnie's introduction to wrestling was also in 1977, in the middle of Flair and Steamboat. She was a local model in Raleigh who was hired to be one of Flair's baby dolls for a TV angle. Flair, who played the ultimate playboy, had dressed up woman on each arm and was all dressed up himself. In an angle that the two duplicated on a bigger scale in 1989 just before their first match of the series, Steamboat attacked Flair and tore his expensive suit off, leaving him in his underwear, with nothing but his dress socks and a tie. Steamboat and Bonnie met again years later, and she wanted nothing to do with a wrestler. So of course, they ended up married. Bonnie was impossible for promoters to deal with, always feeling Ricky was getting the shaft in some form, and it being wrestling, she was probably right at least some of the time. Bonnie made it clear from 1987 on that she thought the four biggest stars in the business were Hogan, Flair, Savage and her husband, and they were all making more money than he was. The problem was that Steamboat was, with Flair, the best in the country at making a match, but he was not a good draw on top. Even after the Wrestlemania III match with Savage that many considered the greatest match in WWF history not only at the time, but for many years following, the house show rematches between the two didn't draw well. Bonnie gave birth and Rick asked to take time off. Rick's long IC title run plan was changed when he asked for time off. On June 2, 1987 at a TV taping in Buffalo, the decision was made for Steamboat to lose the IC title to Butch Reed. Reed was a superstar for Watts, that McMahon's people felt, by copying Sweet Daddy Siki as an African-American bleaching his hair blond, would make him one of the great heels of all-time. He didn't come close. Reed missed the show, so they were scrambling. The unlikely choice was Roy Wayne Ferris, the first cousin of Memphis wrestling legend Jerry Lawler, as the Honky Tonk Man.

While everyone who had been around wrestling for years knew it, there was a strong lesson sent to everyone in 1989. Great wrestling matches do not necessarily sell tickets. They do if the personalities or dynamics of the program work, but the fringe fans who make the difference between a house of 3,500 and 12,000 are not coming because a **** match may be held in their hometown. Steamboat's tenures in WWF and WCW, and he bounced back-and-forth, always ended bitterly, more than once with lawsuits filed.

The family man gimmick was totally wrong for a pro wrestling babyface at that time. But the three big Flair-Steambot matches of 1989 are remembered as they should be, for what took place inside the ring. What is largely forgotten is that none of the three drew well.

WWF, on the other hand, was on fire. Hogan and Savage did their break-up over Elizabeth on February 3, 1989, and their Wrestlemania match on April 2, 1989, because PPV had grown from five million homes two years earlier to 11 million homes, looked to break the Hogan-Andre total revenue records. With Savage as a heel, he was packing them in against Ultimate Warrior. Hogan was still packing them in against Bossman. The turn had made Savage so hot that many people questioned whether Hogan should get the belt back right away because it was obvious this program, perhaps the best long-term slow building angle in company history, was going to be huge. The plan was always for Hogan to win it back. The babyface long chase of the big belt was an NWA program, and the WWF did things differently.

With all that money at stake, WWE tried a power play. The tradition was a 50/50 split of PPV revenue between the local cable company and the promoter. Actually it was less than that, because the PPV channel itself would get a middle-man's piece, so then, like now, the wrestling company got about 43% of the total PPV revenue. With PPV clearly the future biggest revenue source and Wrestlemania figuring to be the biggest wrestling event in history, McMahon demanded a bigger cut. The same cable companies who were mad at Jim Crockett for putting on a free show, costing them millions, against Wrestlemania IV, went to Turner, the most powerful man in cable. They asked him to put on a show on a PPV show April 2, 1989, largely playing hardball with McMahon. TBS even named the show "The Ultimate Gamble" (a name that ended up being dropped because it ended up as a Clash of the Champions). Request and Viewers Choice, the two biggest in the PPV market at the time, both had gone to Turner. McMahon would have been lucky to have cleared 25% of the cable homes, and to make matters worse, nearly all of those companies would have broadcast the Turner show head-to-head, leaving millions on the table.

At first, McMahon considered going heavily into closed-circuit, but in two years, the dynamics had changed greatly. Wrestlemania IV was down 60% in closed-circuit from the records set by Hogan and Andre. A heavyweight title boxing match with Mike Tyson, an incredible draw, against an undersized Michael Spinks, had just bombed on closed circuit, and it was considered a dead business.

There was simply too much to lose to prove a point, really, on all sides by not airing the Hogan-Savage bonanza. McMahon backed down on his demands. The companies that had begged Turner to run a show, now were begging him not to. WCW had made many plans for that date, so the compromise was reached where one last time, there would be a live free TV special going head-to-head with a PPV.

McMahon managed to head-off Turner on February 20, 1989. He ran a house show two nights earlier, selling out the Rosemont Horizon with 17,900 paying \$213,000, which Titan claimed at 19,000, reporting it as the largest indoor crowd for any entertainment event in the history of Chicago at the time. Hogan beat Bossman in a cage, plus Savage over Brown, in matches nobody remembers today. The next night, Hogan and Bossman, in St. Louis, broke the city's all-time gate record set for the Muchnick retirement show seven years earlier. Steamboat pinned Flair with a cradle off a figure four leglock in 23:18 at the UIC Pavilion to capture the NWA title in a match that nobody who saw it likely will ever forget. But the paid attendance was only 5,111 paying \$68,700, with 7,900 total in the building with paper, and did about 155,000 buys on PPV.

But April 2 ended up being the classic signs of what would plague the WCW organization, problems with understanding the very basics of high stakes wrestling. Jim Herd moved the show from the Omni in Atlanta to the Superdome in New Orleans for the Flair-Steamboat rematch, head-to-head with Mania at Trump Plaza. While Trump Plaza was a disaster as a site for Mania the previous year, this time The Donald paid McMahon a \$1.8 million site fee to have the event at his casino. With its much larger capacity, Herd figured on a p.r. coup of out drawing Mania both with live audience and total viewers watching on television. He didn't count on the most obvious problem. New Orleans had been dead as a wrestling city since some time before the death of Watts' promotion. McMahon made an attempt in that building a few years earlier with a Hogan & Junkyard Dog tag team on top, and only drew 6,000 fans. Worse, Scott couldn't get into the groove about the changing business. To Scott, the television was designed to sell tickets to the house shows, and nothing more. That's how wrestling had been for years. Flair vs. Steamboat was main eventing every house show, and Scott felt that pushing that the match would be on free television would kill the live gates. There was almost no mention, and no hype at all, for the show on any of the WCW television shows, even as late as the week before the second Super Sunday. TBS didn't get Scott's thought process, and even those that did recognized the importance of the show and that Scott was out of touch with the changed business. His days were done. The revolving booker pattern, a WCW tradition, was well on its way.

As the worst-hyped major show in anyone's memory, there were only a few hundred tickets sold in a building that could hold about 90,000. Scott was fired the Tuesday before the show, and replaced by the first of many booking committees, this one consisting of Gilbert, Kevin Sullivan, Herd, Jim Ross, Flair and Barnett. They had exactly one Saturday afternoon show to hype what was supposed to be a major show to oppose Wrestlemania. Even worse, the rating on that show was a 2.0, the lowest rated Saturday TBS rating in history, blamed on the dull TV Scott put together over the previous month. It was another embarrassment for Herd, since he had invited many of the NWA champions of the past, such as Pat O'Connor, Lou Thesz, Buddy Rogers, Gene Kiniski and Terry Funk to the show, as well as Muchnick. Funk's appearance proved to be interesting. He suggested the idea he was interested in coming back.

Wrestlemania drew 18,946 fans and a new North American record of \$1,628,000 to Trump Plaza. Combined with the site fee, the WWF made more at the live venue than for all but a few shows in company history even to this day. There were about 650,000 buys on PPV, which also broke the all-time record, a number which held up as a record until the 1998 show which featured Tyson as a referee leading to the coronation of Steve Austin as the next gigantic drawing card in the business. To put that figure in perspective, there are roughly five times as many homes that have PPV today, and this year's Wrestlemania did well under that figure. Savage had contracted a severe staph infection in his left elbow and was told not to wrestle. There wasn't a chance of that happening, and he put on his usual top flight big show performance as he lost to the Hogan legdrop in 17:51. The main event was good, but the rest of the show was not. For the second year in a row, McMahon's highlight show of the year was only No. 2 on the day.

Flair and Steamboat were booked by Scott to do a 60:00 draw in a best of three fall match. The new committee made a minor

change. They did a carefully done finish of the third fall at 55:32. Steamboat went for a double chicken wing submission (the same move Jazz now uses as a finisher), the same move he had won the second fall with. But his knee, which Flair had worked over much of the match, gave way, and they wound up in a double cradle with both men having their shoulders down. It was ruled Steamboat got his shoulder up. The camera work was carefully designed to miss Flair's leg brushing the ropes at the finish. But during Steamboat's post-match interview, he saw a second camera angle, which clearly showed Flair's foot on the ropes, for the controversy to lead to another round of rematches. By almost all accounts at the time, it was their second straight ***** match and the only question was which of the two bouts would win Match of the Year. As it turned out, this was the one. But only Steamboat knew the real price, as he was coughing up blood in his hotel room that night from the ridiculous number of brutal chops he had taken.

But when it was over, Herd, Flair and the rest of those in charge found out the meaning of a term that would be repeated for years. WCW was the red-headed stepchild of the Turner family. Even though the ad department was specifically ordered to guard against this happening because they knew McMahon loved to sabotage the product and had actually fooled them into something similar on the first Clash a year earlier, an ad taken by the WWF to call their 900 number for all the news and results of Wrestlemania aired late in the broadcast. Worse, CNN, owned by Turner, sent an entire crew to Trump Plaza, and gave a ton of coverage to Mania, but never once mentioned the Clash. *USA Today* did a preview and Hogan referred to the NWA as "a small outlaw group," while Steamboat said that the WWF didn't have as good wrestling as the NWA. But it wasn't all one sided, as it had to be an embarrassment to WWF when Bryant Gumbel went on television the day after Wrestlemania and talked about Flair and Steamboat having the best wrestling match he had ever seen.

But with no promotion, the Clash did a 4.3 rating, the lowest rated Clash of Champions in history up to that point in time, and just a 5.0 for the main event itself, which at the time was 2.42 million homes. There were only 5,300 in the Superdome and just 1,300 paying \$15,000. The company announced "more than 20,000" anyway. Michael Hayes, who did the color on the show with Jim Ross, and is a current member of the WWE writing team, and held the record for the building with his 1980 dog collar match with Junkyard Dog that did 28,000 people (announced as 38,000 at the time), even went so far as to point out he held the wrestling record in the building, and then paused embarrassingly, and said, "well, uh, until tonight."

But like the year before, the Clash of Champions created, in one night, another star who would become one of the biggest names in the business over the next decade.

While not making a Sting like impact, the wrestling world was buzzing the next day about a Japanese newcomer who was supposed to be a heel managed by Gary Hart. 26-year-old Keiji Muto had been wrestling in Florida, Texas and Puerto Rico as Super White Ninja. He did well in those circuits, but in Texas, was mainly a punch-kick heel so as not to show up the Von Erichs, in particular Kevin, who was his rival, but who nobody was allowed to outperform when it came to high flying moves. But against Steve Casey, he let loose. With his ring speed and unique moves, including never seen before moves like the handspring elbow, the power elbow and the finishing moonsault, the crowd went wild for him. But politics were in all

force. Even though people were cheering him, the doctrine was that American fans would never cheer a Japanese wrestler. He was at first called The Great Mota, because someone confused his real last name with that of a famous baseball player from the 60s. It quickly became The Great Muta, who manager Gary Hart claimed was the son of the Great Kabuki, another Hart protege who was a top U.S. heel in the early 80s in several different circuits. If he had turned, as many on the booking committee wanted, it could have meant the end of Gary Hart. So he stayed heel for a year, largely working against Sting. Muta and Sting started a feud of face painted high flying heavyweights that was among the highlights of the year, and remained famous in Japan thereafter, as they would wrestle against each other or team with each other on big shows for years.

Muta, like most of the wrestlers on top with the company, brought workrate to the table. Jim Herd was promoting great wrestling. But he was no match for a great wrestling promoter.

The final chapter of the legendary 1989 trilogy was on May 7 in Nashville. The war was in full force. Herd, attempting to do a celebrity tie-in, didn't learn from the mistakes of his predecessor. Years earlier, Crockett's Great American Bash tour included a concert with a major country star, David Allan Coe. Even though the stereotype was that the wrestling audience was the Southern redneck audience that liked monster trucks, country music and NASCAR, blending the two on the same show didn't work. Herd didn't know this, and for the PPV, hired the Oak Ridge Boys for a concert. It turned out to be a very expensive intermission. McMahon booked the same building for the night before, doing the company's best sabotage job. As was the m.o. at the time, McMahon kept the show going well past midnight, delaying by a few hours the already rushed set-up for the PPV. WCW countered by sending many of its wrestlers to the local mall at the same time as the WWF show. The WWF still drew a near sellout of 7,950 fans and \$76,000, for a show designed not to entertain. It wasn't as if the guys were told to tank it, but the motives were clear. Not only was the regular crew that would have run that night, with Bret Hart vs. Mr. Perfect, Demolition vs. Bossman & Akeem (One Man Gang) and Ultimate Warrior vs. Rick Rude scheduled, but the other major show running that night had Savage vs. Beefcake and DiBiase vs. Jake Roberts in Indianapolis. At about 10:30 p.m., Jim Powers and Mike Sharpe were put in the ring for a long match to stall until the headliners who had worked earlier in the night could fly in. The idea was to keep the fans until 12:30 a.m., and burn them out with a four-and-a-half hour show, to kill the walk-up for the PPV the next afternoon.

WCW's PPV drew 5,200, which with the stage set up for the Oak Ridge Boys, looked full enough on television, but a sizeable percentage of that was papered as the house was \$37,000 and paid was under 4,000. It did about 150,000 buys on PPV. The Flair-Steamboat gimmick this time, was that in the advent of a draw (which the previous match was supposed to be until the late change), three judges and legendary champions, Thesz, O'Connor and Terry Funk, would pick the winner. Steamboat injured his leg, which Flair took advantage of. Later he went for a simple bodyslam, the leg injury was sold, and Flair cradled him at 31:37 of another ***** match. Even though New Orleans won Match of the Year, many considered this the best bout of the three, and many readers at the time considered it the Best Match of the entire Decade. Even though it wouldn't look quite that good to modern fans, both HHH and Jim Cornette have called it perhaps the greatest

wrestling match ever held. Jim Ross came to the ring to interview Flair, who with the win, was one shy of the all-time record for NWA title wins held by Harley Race (well today's history would say, and correctly so, different numbers, but at the time, many out of the country title changes were not recognized in NWA records, so this was considered Flair's sixth win, tying Theesz, and one behind Race). Funk came to the ring to congratulate him, then turned subtle heel by constantly interrupting Flair, who even though he played heel in the match, was cheered by almost everyone for the win and for the good sportsmanship of he and Steamboat doing a post-match handshake. The live fans all recognized they had seen something special, which added to the atmosphere of the moment. Funk asked for a title shot and Flair said he'd be happy, but Funk had to do what everyone else did, and work his way up the rankings. A very slow build-up of words ensued, ending with a handshake, and a sucker punch by Funk, his 180 maniac turn (before such a double-cross spot was done weekly on television), and what was considered hardcore at the time, a piledriver on a table.

It was played up old-school, as if Flair had gotten a broken neck. Whenever Flair would leave the house around town, and even in the company offices in Atlanta when he'd come to do booking work, he always wore a neck collar. His doctor appeared on the television show to confirm the injury as real, which it was, although it actually had happened years earlier and Flair had just kept wrestling on it.

At the time, WCW had another wrestler considered at the same level in the ring as Flair and Steamboat. He was Mulligan's son, Barry Windham. Windham, 28, started wrestling as a teenager and became a huge favorite from early in his career as Rhodes groomed him in Florida. He was 6-6 and 260 pounds, and not only could work, but in his youth was considered a total heartthrob to women, and he was on everyone's short list to be a future world champion. He had left for the WWF, where he formed a tag team with brother-in-law Mike Rotundo. They held the tag titles and were one of the company's best teams of the 80s. He came back under Rhodes, and he and Flair had some of the decades best matches in the mid-80s, including two memorable televised matches, one in Orlando, FL that earned 1986 Match of the Year honors, and another in Fayetteville, NC. The latter was a unique one-hour television show where the entire show was the one match, ending in a draw, and was considered perhaps the best television show of the year. Windham had been aligned with Flair for a long time, both in and out of the ring, as a member of the Four Horseman, and later as the top heel tag team when the Horseman disbanded with Anderson & Blanchard leaving. Windham was bigger, younger, more athletic and more versatile than Flair, and many would say better in the ring at the time. But didn't have Flair's dedication and passion for the business, charisma or interview ability and didn't appear to be someone who would be as a good a draw because of it. As virtually every heir apparent did, Windham grew impatient waiting for Flair to grow old. When Funk got his promised spot as Flair's next opponent, combined with being mad about not being put on the booking committee, there was a blow-up with management. He was laid up with a broken hand and supposed to get surgery. When management found out he hadn't got his surgery even though he claimed he had, he was fired. Five weeks later he signed with WWF. To show that McMahon's Midas touch with making people bigger than anyone else didn't include everyone, McMahon recreated Windham, calling him The Widow Maker. The same person

that was considered championship material in WCW was a flop in WWF.

"No Holds Barred," Hogan's big screen lead star debut, was released in June. It was destroyed by critics, but pushed like crazy on WWF television as the greatest action movie you'd ever see. It did \$5 million, making it the top movie in the country, its opening weekend. It didn't have great legs, and McMahon lost money on the project, and never himself put together another movie, although with his new movie division, that is likely to change. The plot was hilarious. The lead heel in the movie was the unscrupulous head of a major television network, determined to ruin Hogan, the big star for the rival company, and run the babyface promotion out of business. McMahon couldn't have been more obvious. But the movie did make McMahon a boatload of money in a very unexpected way.

Before Flair vs. Funk ever took place, a near disaster struck. Funk suffered a broken sacrum at a house show match just a few weeks before the PPV. It was kept secret from the public. Funk took a few shows off, but was back working house shows before the PPV putting on absolute clinic of working the fans into a frenzy while avoiding taking bumps because of his injury. He was supposed to be unable to wrestle, but he was tearing down the house every night against Sting. Outside of the ring, he appeared to be almost crippled. Flair, and all the WCW officials who saw him, were scared and afraid of what would happen for him to be in a long, physical main event program, particularly having to follow up the standards of the Steamboat matches.

While Flair and Steamboat was a disappointing draw, Flair vs. Funk was the most successful feud of the first several years of the Turner company. Flair stayed out of action from Nashville through the famed 1989 Baltimore Bash. Flair's return, his first match in years as a full-fledged babyface, may have been the best PPV wrestling show up to that point in time, in particular the triple main event, all of which were **** matches at the time. Newly turned heel Luger faced Steamboat. The original plan was a no DQ match with Luger going over. Steamboat, embroiled in a contract dispute after his original six-month deal had expired, refused to do a job unless a new deal was reached. Steamboat was looking for money comparable to the other top main eventers, below Flair, but above Sting. Herd saw that Steamboat hadn't drawn, and the belief was Sting would be a huge draw someday and he and Luger were the future of the company. That meant a DQ finish, in what may have been the best match of Luger's career. There was a lot of internal strife about the Steamboat deal and wrestlers were vocal in siding with Steamboat, who was very popular among the younger wrestlers because he'd give them pointers and carried so much respect. Many also noted that Luger, whom people were talking about after this match as a top-20 wrestler and who won Most Improved Wrestler that year, really wasn't that good. Steamboat had created the illusion with him, and that was a hidden value Herd didn't understand. Flair in particular tried to go to bat for Steamboat, noting that the belt was still the most important thing and there were only a few former world champions even active, and in those days it carried a status that would stay with most champions until the end of their career. But it also should be noted that ultra-face Steamboat, because he loved to sell., to the new audience that got off on power and domination, gave him a mixed response.

Steamboat was under the impression they had reached an agreement for \$275,000 per year. Herd claimed not to have

agreed to that figure, and when crunch time came would only offer \$225,000, since he was under pressure to cut costs by this time. Steamboat felt insulted that two months after being world champion and having the mostly highly acclaimed series of matches in the U.S. in anyone's memory, or at least dating back to the legend of Funk vs. Brisco from a previous generation, that he, with his track record and star power, was being offered considerably less than Sting or Luger. In those days, it was standard operating procedure in wrestling that when a wrestler left WWF or WCW, it would be ignored publicly and the wrestlers' name would never be mentioned. The smaller companies, the AWA and Mid South years earlier, would go on television and attempt to bury if a major star left, stating they left because they couldn't handle whomever it was they were feuding with at the time, or if they left for WWF, it was because they were looking for easier competition.

Herd instead instructed Gordon Solie to announce that Steamboat had suffered a foot injury (he did have a foot injury, but was willing to work through it). They even sent out a press release stating Steamboat was out with a foot injury and for personal reasons, but the parting was amicable and they would like to bring him back.

There was also a War Games, and Flair got his revenge pinning Funk in 17:23 in a ****½ match that was very different from the usual Flair style. Buys were up to 180,000. The company also set its live gate record, that would stand until the boom period under Bischoff, with more than 12,000 paid and \$188,000. The rematches at the arenas were not on fire, aside from an Atlanta series of three bouts, which all drew more than 9,800, and the expected Amarillo sellout, but it was the best drawing house show program in WCW until the late 90s. Flair started wanting to turn back, but it had been set up for him to work with a heel Luger at the end of the year and for Starrcade at the time.

If there is a frustration with fans who have followed McMahon's rises and falls with the current product, it is that many of the basic tenets on how to get people over were maybe not invented by McMahon, but certainly fine tuned. There was no greater example of this than Tom "Tiny" Lister. Lister, at 6-4 ½ and 280 pounds, played Zeus, Hogan's rival in the movie "No Holds Barred." He was an African American actor, huge and gassed up. He had not only never wrestled before, but had never trained to be a wrestler. McMahon put him in giant lifts and billed him at 6-10 (which wasn't as hard as it sounded since Hogan was always billed at 6-8 in those days). They did a few TV angles, where he looked indestructible. He sold for nobody, and one clumsy blow from him would lay out everyone who got near him. At the time, many wrestlers were furious. Years earlier, when McMahon used Mr. T, there was an uproar among veterans, because he was using an actor and making him look stronger than his main event wrestlers, which they saw as a slap in the face to the wrestlers and the business. But in hindsight, few could argue the contribution Mr. T made to the growth of wrestling. But Mr. T was a household word that got the entire country talking, as possibly the biggest TV star of the era. Lister, while impressive looking, was an unknown actor who had a small part in a movie that had a good first week and then quickly died. When he first showed up on WWF TV, claiming a grudge against Hogan from what happened on the movie set, there was denial even within the company that he'd be put in the ring, let alone in the main event of the company's second biggest show of the year. When confronted, several in the office even told wrestlers, who could see the obvious, that they were seeing wrong. Wrestlers were told it was just

something they were doing on TV to promote video sales of the movie, and nothing more.

But in an angle taped on July 18, 1989 in Worcester for NBC, the two squared off. Zeus stood on the ring steps to give the illusion of being the muscular giant that Hogan had never come up against. Hogan's best drawing foes had been usually the fat giant monsters like Andre, Kamala, John Studd, King Kong Bundy or One Man Gang, or the good workers who were much smaller than him like Savage and Paul Orndorff. Hogan threw punches, and Zeus just stood there no-selling. He put some simple nerve hold on that he couldn't possibly botch and Hogan sold it like it was the Fritz Von Erich Iron Claw.

McMahon was almost completely without fear. He booked a tag match, Hogan & Brutus Beefcake, Hogan's childhood best friend who through his influence became one of the big stars of the era, against Savage & Zeus. The Meadowlands Arena was sold out with about 20,000 paying \$350,000. The show did a whopping 575,000 PPV buys, the second largest total up to that point in history, behind only Hogan vs. Savage, up to that time in history. Zeus tagged in three times and did nothing but chokes and bearhugs. With the kind of numbers this show did, one would think it would have led to a long series of lucrative bouts, as they could easily do a singles title program that could have either drawn close to record numbers on PPV, or a huge house show run. But McMahon figured that even in those days, Zeus could be exposed in one night. Hogan pinned him with a legdrop to vanquish him as a contender. But over the next eight years, many Wrestlemanias didn't come close to those numbers. This was the same promoter who got the charismatic but totally untalented Ultimate Warrior over, not just for one big gate, but for a few years. Yet, 14 years later, when he signed Bill Goldberg, he did the opposite, and also got the opposite results.

This was also the same promotion that stumbled for the first two months of the presentation of Brock Lesnar, until Hogan, of all people, agreed to the scenario that overcame most of the early mistakes, for about a month, until internal politics and a presentation that exposed his out of the ring weaknesses took the edge off Lesnar's character as well.

The lessons of Zeus and getting beaten by WWF despite putting on so much better wrestling saw Herd try to beat McMahon. He came up with crazy ideas that everyone else was shooting down. He wanted Flair to change his name to Spartacus, cut his hair, and come out in an outfit like in the 50s Steve Reeves movies. Instead of realizing that the Clash with Flair vs. Steamboat wasn't promoted at all, and the rating they got was a miracle, he decided it was proof that nobody wanted to watch a wrestling match that went longer than 20:00. He felt WCW's better wrestling could win the adults, but he needed characters to win the kids. His most famous idea, which actually transpired for a few weeks, was a masked tag team called The Ding Dongs. They would wear costumes with bells all over them, be billed from Belleville, and the member of the team outside the ring would have a giant bell that he'd constantly ring. To make things worse, with no trial run, he tried this one out on a live Clash on June 14 on a brutally hot night in Fayetteville. In those days a Clash, except for PPV, were the only time wrestling was televised live, and also in those days the worst time to try out a risky act. Greg Evans & Richard Sartain, who were under the masks, didn't realize that when they would take a bump, the small bells attached to their costume would fall off. Within two minutes of the match, the ring was littered with small bells, and they became the first of

many laughing stock acts in the history of the WCW promotion. Another idea was a tag team called The Hunchbacks, with the gimmick that since they had hunchbacks, they could never be pinned.

Ironically, Herd also had other ideas at the time. He wanted to move WCW Saturday night from its traditional 6:05 p.m. start time to 7:05 p.m., with the idea the ratings would increase in prime time. Actually in those days, the traditional time was more important than prime time to wrestling fans, and ratings dropped even in a theoretically better time slot. He also wanted to do the show live, saying that live would be worth 1.0 to 1.5 added ratings points. In those days, without the communication, most fans just assumed everything was live anyway so it's probable that wouldn't have meant a thing. Even years later, when Raw would do a live show and then several taped shows, the taped shows usually drew better numbers than the live show. Smackdown even today almost always has a higher audience, and usually a better realistic rating than the live Raw. However, his idea of presenting a house show like card, live, in prime time every week, years later was the thing that turned the industry around. The other thing that turned the company around, raiding WWF for talent, was also his idea. While Hogan was thought to be untouchable, and quite frankly, Hogan was so big at the time that his jumping probably would have completely changed the balance of power, because it's doubtful WCW would have botched the country's biggest potential drawing program of the time, Hogan vs. Flair, like WWF did years later, because there wouldn't have been the level of ego involved. Herd had no interest in Warrior, as many felt him to be a flash in the plan. But he had serious interest in the tag champs, Arn Anderson & Tully Blanchard, and in particular, Piper and Savage. Piper wasn't doing a full schedule at that point. If the company had a synergistic effort, they could have landed him, and quite frankly, had at least enough of a shot with Hogan to open doors. Among the companies under the Turner umbrella were movie companies. Both Piper and Hogan were looking toward Hollywood as their futures. Offering both a contract that would guarantee movies built around them, combined with wrestling, would have been difficult to turn down. But wrestling was the red-headed stepchild at the time and Herd had no luck using the big company resources to help him. Years later, when Eric Bischoff did, it was a big help in getting big names to come over.

But more so, Petrik was nervous about the company losses, and the last thing he wanted to do was add to the payroll. Herd had talks with both Piper and Savage. Whether Piper was truly interested, only he knows, as it seemed there was a pattern with him. He'd be gone for a while. There would be talks with WCW, and suddenly, he'd be back with WWF on television. Savage was going back-and-forth, but by that time, his wife Elizabeth, understood the business enough to where decisions were simple. "If they offer more money, we go," she said to him at the time. But when the meeting came down, Petrik only authorized Herd to offer Savage around \$600,000 per year, which was less than he was earning already. Those discussions ended quickly with everyone feeling they had wasted their time. Herd also had another disadvantage when it came to the bottom line. The big organization expected the wrestling company to carry its weight through house show and PPV revenue (merchandise was not a big deal although they were trying). Years later, the company started paying \$8 million per year in rights fees for the three hours of weekly programming and highly rated Clash specials. If Herd had that advantage, the company would have been in the black even in

the first year, and so many of the pressures would have been different. He'd probably have been on better footing to offer deals to raid talent. It's ironic that with all of Herd's bungling, that the main ideas Eric Bischoff used to turn the company around were the same ideas Herd had from the start, but the company wasn't interested at the time in risking serious money to compete with McMahon, feeling they should just try and lose as little as possible while providing a good product.

The big shows for the rest of the year from both companies largely came from themed shows and not build-up for world title matches. WCW's Halloween Havoc, its most financially successful PPV of the company's early history, hit 215,000 buys while going head-to-head with the seventh game of the World Series. It was headlined by a Thunderdome cage match with Flair (wrestling with a staph infection and a 102 degree fever) & Sting, now elevated to main event status for the first time ever on PPV, beating Funk & Muta in 21:55, with Bruno Sammartino, by this time a hated enemy of McMahon since quitting the company as announcer, working as referee. But the live show failed to sellout Philadelphia, drawing 7,300 paying \$104,234. WWF's Survivor Series failed to sellout the Rosemont Horizon, which Hogan and Bossman had done months earlier for a house show, doing 15,294 paying \$239,917, and doing about 380,000 PPV buys. Hogan teamed with Jake Roberts & Demolition to beat DiBiase & Zeus (in his second match) & Powers of Pain in an elimination match. Zeus, who didn't wear the lifts in his boots he wore the first time, was shockingly shorter than Hogan after towering over him months earlier, and was DQ'd immediately to get him out of the way. They didn't even put it on last, saving that for Ultimate Warrior, who by this time was very seriously being considered as Hogan's heir apparent. The big deal for Warrior was a house show run where he would, in the main event, pin Andre, who had only been pinned once in WWF rings, in the 1987 Hogan match, every night in less than one minute. There was no question after that kind of result that he was the next superstar. It got over good in some cities, poorly in others. Many felt it would kill repeat business, but Warrior-Andre rematches, while down, did solid numbers. Warrior & The Rockers (Shawn Michaels & Marty Jannetty) & Jim Neidhart beat Andre & Haku & Arn Anderson & Bobby Heenan. Heenan replaced Blanchard, who had been advertised until the day of the show even though he was no longer in the company.

Flair, as booker, wanted his buddies, Blanchard & Anderson back. At the time, they were WWF tag team champions, but they didn't have the size nor the physique to be headliners in that environment. They were more suited to the WCW wrestling product, and were far more over to that audience from their glory days. Herd authorized Flair to offer them \$250,000 apiece to jump, as their contracts were coming due, and it was more than they were earning at the time. They jumped at the offer. With the company running so deeply in the red, Herd had second thoughts. Anderson & Blanchard gave notice and immediately dropped the tag team titles to Demolition on October 2 in Wheeling, WV. Right after that, Blanchard was informed that his last drug test came back positive for cocaine, and he was let go on the spot. Herd, fearing criticism from his higher-ups if the media word got out that the Turner company had just hired a wrestler who had just been fired by the rival company for cocaine, rescinded the offer for Blanchard. He also cut back Anderson's offer to \$156,000. Blanchard was 35 and looked to be entering his peak earning years in the business. He went from being ready to get the biggest money contract of his career, and suddenly he was unemployed, and with no future in the business he had grown

up in from childhood, and he knew nothing else. Like his father, after wrestling had kicked him to the curb when Southwest Championship Wrestling went down, he coped with losing wrestling by finding religion. While he wrestled independently and had a flit or two years later with returning to wrestling at WCW, it never transpired, and it was the shocking end of a big-time career.

There was one last **** classic on the big stage that year. In perhaps Gordon Solie's last great hype job, he coined the phrase, "Five letters. Two words. I Quit." The prototypical and possibly the greatest I Quit match ever took place on November 15 in Troy, NY.

The Flair-Funk program had run its course at the house shows, and Flair was scheduled to move on to Muta and Luger as contenders. The final Clash of the Champions of the year was to be the blow-off of the feud. It was also supposed to be the last match of Funk's career, although few outside the company knew that. He had already retired twice before, once in Japan in one of the highest profile retirement tours and final matches in wrestling history, but came back a little over a year later. He quietly had done so after breaking his back a few years earlier and being in so much pain he couldn't go on. It was WCW management, fearing for his health, despite the match quality, who decided to retire him, and use him as a television announcer for the rest of his contract. Few imagined at the time he would come back to work for the company many times over, retire so many times that nobody could keep count, and would still be wrestling at the age of 58.

Funk was 46 and had long been one of the business' all-time legends, but outside the ring, due to all his wars, he moved like he was an old man. Once the bell rang, it was another story. Many feel that this was the greatest match of his U.S. career, and from a pure brawling standpoint, the greatest of Flair's as well. It was the simplest of endings, Funk saying "I Quit" while trapped in the figure four at 18:38. The show drew a 4.9 rating, but the main event did a 6.3. While it didn't peak as high as the final 15 minutes of the Flair-Sting Clash match, for the match as a whole, it reached 3.216 million homes, making it the most watched match from start-to-finish ever on the SuperStation, and trailing only the first national Royal Rumble for all-time cable viewership record.

Starrcade, originally scheduled for Flair vs. Luger, was changed. The company had been doing marketing focus groups on its talent. Among people with no knowledge of the product, the most likeable personality was Sting. Flair didn't fare nearly so well. This told the TBS brass that as good as Flair was in the ring, and as loyal as his following, he shouldn't be "the man." Flair wanted to be a heel again anyway. The scenario was that Starrcade would be a singles and a tag team tournament called "Future Shock, The Night of the Iron Man." The company's top four singles wrestlers, Flair, Sting, Muta, and Luger, all wrestled each other with the idea of starting the push for Sting to be the company franchise. Muta, who hadn't done a clean singles job all year, was asked to lose three times. He did, got furious, and quit the company, going back to New Japan where he eventually became the company's biggest star. Luger pinned Sting early, to set up the future, but via the complicated points system, Sting pinned Flair in 15:54 of what was supposed to be a 15:00 time limit but they didn't get to the finish on time, to win the tournament. Generally speaking, there was a lesson, from the 1985 WWF Wrestling Classic and 1988 Wrestlemania, that tournaments do disappointing PPV business. This one didn't even have the title

at stake. The show drew just 5,200 paid (6,000 total) at the Omni, less than half of what two of the Flair-Funk house shows had done in the building a few months earlier, for a \$70,000 house for what was called in wrestling, "the granddaddy of them all (since Starrcade was the original supercard). Those in WWF, hearing those numbers, joked that WCW had just killed Starrcade. But PPV buys were at normal WCW levels, or roughly 150,000.

It was supposed to set the wave of the future. And it did. WCW would present great matches in the ring, but the presentation was all botched up. The idea for 1990 was this. Flair, as a babyface, would convince Sting to join the Four Horsemen after Sting proved himself at Starrcade. Then, the Horsemen, Flair & Ole & Arn Anderson, would turn on him, to set up the title match. Sting would win the title on February 25, 1990 at the Greensboro Coliseum. Luger's win over Sting would be played up to make Luger his main heel foe, with Flair in the background. Several WCW officials who didn't understand the business thought that would make the company turn around. The booking committee for the most part didn't, as it was composed of Flair allies like Cornette and Kevin Sullivan at that point. But nobody, including Flair, had any objections about putting the title on Sting. But it still didn't happen that way, which led to a ton of early year fireworks.

Most consider, at the age of 40, that 1989 was the greatest year of Flair's career. The three Steamboat matches and the I Quit Funk match finished as the top four in Match of the Year, making it an accomplishment that no feud and no wrestler in history has ever done. The Baltimore Funk match placed sixth. A March 18 match at the Capital Center with Steamboat that wasn't televised was as good as any of them. An August 20 house show match in Chicago with Funk was better than the match in Baltimore. The legend of these matches were such, that three years later, when they were replayed by Bill Watts in lieu of current programming on the Sunday TBS show, they did far better numbers than anything current. They also did very strong numbers for a few all-night wrestling parties on the Superstation five or more years later, usually based around this core of matches. Many would rank them the top four matches in the 13-year history of the company.

But the company had lost \$6 million, perhaps the biggest one year loss of any wrestling company in history. Flair was both the booker and its biggest star. Many blamed Flair as being too old to headline because the little kids who worshiped Hogan couldn't relate to him, as the TV demos still showed WCW, with all its publicity drawbacks, dueling evenly with adults and being way behind in kids. Sting was younger, fresher, thought to be potentially as charismatic (although time proved that not to be the case) and a whole lot better wrestler than Hogan. But he couldn't do a promo that got people wanting to buy tickets. He could have great matches with Flair, or most of the top guys, but didn't have Flair's, and most of the great NWA champions of the previous 20 years' ability to carry mid-level talent. After the show, in the company's home base, most fans talked about Flair stealing one more show, having three great matches and putting Sting over, and classily ending the show by saying, "To be the man, you've got to beat the man," and, pointing at Sting, "I give you the man." But company officials were talking differently. Flair was one short of tying Race's record, and the big quote of the night was, "there will be no No. 7."

As the WWF's year came to a close, it was evident the big money match would be something new. It would be a battle of

babyfaces. WWF officials had avoided this kind of a match on a big stage for 18 years, since the Sammartino vs. Pedro Morales match at Shea Stadium. Hogan vs. Warrior was set for Toronto's Sky Dome to headline Wrestlemania V. With Hogan scheduled to do a movie right after, logic said that Warrior was going to go over. For McMahon, it was a way to repeat the ultra successful 1978-1981 period. Warrior would be the young champion who would draw because he was in the title match programs, a far more charismatic Backlund even if two people couldn't have been more opposite in every way except both decades later getting into Republican party politics; while Hogan would be around, probably as an even bigger draw, in the Sammartino "Living Legend" role. Really, things couldn't have looked much better.

Barely four years earlier, Borden and Hellwig were two muscle head alternates for a concept from a guy who wasn't even in the wrestling industry, found at Gold's Gyms in Southern California. They trained together and started together as a tag team, and were an initial laughing stock. As the new decade approached, they were set to be multi-millionaires, and were supposed to be the two biggest stars to carry the business through the final decade of the century.

As important as all that sounds, none, in hindsight, was as potentially important as three minor incidents, two of which were considered relatively insignificant to the point that nobody in wrestling was probably aware of them. The third, while it made news, hardly seemed all that important either.

In late 1988, the U.S. Government passed a law making it a felony for a doctor to prescribe anabolic steroids for anything other than a legitimate medical reason. Bulking up and getting shredded to get over as a pro wrestler didn't qualify.

In July of 1989, five months after Vince McMahon admitted publicly that pro wrestling was staged entertainment, largely to get out from under the New Jersey State Athletic Commission's new taxes (this actually failed, as it was years before the Jersey commission dropped regulation), efforts to do the same in Pennsylvania passed. In order to drop regulation, McMahon promised there would be no blading in the state, continuing the doctrine from James J. Binns after the incident where Wahoo McDaniel got a blade lodged in his forehead years earlier at a Crockett show at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Philadelphia. That was no great compromise, as in those days the company wasn't allowing blading, and Pennsylvania had been blood free for years. Ironically, many years after this agreement was made, Philadelphia, through ECW, became known as the blood capital of pro wrestling. The other agreement was that with the commission dropping regulation, it would no longer appoint a physician at ringside for the matches. But they did not want medical supervision dropped, so the agreement also included that the promotion itself would be responsible for hiring its physician.

The department hiring medical help for shows for the company fell under a woman named Anita Scales. She had been with the company for years, and was unknown outside of wrestling, but was well known within the business.

Dr. George Zahorian fit a similar profile. Older fans probably remembered the doctor with his bow-tie, who would sit ringside at the television tapings in Allentown's Ag Hall. The ring announcers in those days began the show similar to boxing, announcing the commissioner in attendance at ringside, the

timekeeper at the bell, and long-time fans will remember, "your physician in attendance at ringside is Dr. George Zahorian," and the very distinctive closing line, "and my name is Joe McHugh." On a few occasions, when a doctor was needed to sell an injury angle on television, Zahorian, a mark for the wrestlers, was a very willing participant.

But tapings had moved out of Allentown years earlier. In wrestling, Zahorian was known as the dealer. Whenever wrestlers came to cities in that part of Pennsylvania, Zahorian, appointed by the commission, a governmental agency in what would many years later turn out to be the ultimate in ironies, would be there, setting up shop. Guys would stand in lines, and come out with paper bags filled with steroids and downers. If there was much of a time lag between stops in the area, wrestlers would order by phone, and Zahorian would Fed-Ex them packages. Zahorian was hardly the only doctor doing this, but he was the most famous. It was a joke even dating back to the early 80s (Zahorian started doing this in the late 70s), even when Vince Sr. was running the company, when wrestlers would come in from other territories, they'd be 20 pounds heavier, credited to Zahorian.

It was no secret. McMahon, according to testimony in his trial from Hogan and secretary Emily Feinberg (who kept McMahon's steroids under lock and key), started using steroids with Hogan when "No Holds Barred" was being filmed in Atlanta, getting Fed-Ex packages from Zahorian, and continued until contracting hepatitis a couple of years later and being told by his doctor to get off them. Scales knew of Zahorian's rep and considered him a sleaze, and thought it was not in the best interest of the company to have him at their events, let alone actually hire him to be backstage where it was known he'd be dealing. She immediately got word from Pat Patterson, and later even Linda McMahon, that she was going to hire Zahorian for the next show in that part of the state. Scales testified in McMahon's 1994 trial that she was told by Patterson, who in the same trial testified under oath that he had never heard of steroids at that point in time, that "the boys need their candy."

But before the first show where he would have been hired, Linda McMahon was at a public function in Pennsylvania and was given a tip that the feds were investigating Zahorian and it would be in the company's best interest to steer clear of him. Scales was immediately told to unhire him, and Patterson called Zahorian and told him to get all his records of WWF wrestlers out of his office, expecting a raid.

It was that tip that may have saved both McMahon and the company. Had Zahorian been hired by the WWF, with full knowledge he was a dealer, that would have been the needed link that very well could have convicted McMahon of the charged conspiracy with Zahorian. With the WWF business in the shape it was at the time, a conviction would have been devastating, and would have greatly changed the course of wrestling history. McMahon would have served time with a conviction in such a high profile case. Without that hiring, there was no link, and really no evidence of a conspiracy. McMahon was declared not guilty. Zahorian himself wasn't so lucky in his trial in 1991, which started the ball rolling. He was convicted, and served a few years in prison. The post-trial publicity was the catalyst for the end of the first boom period for the company, and a year later, the end of first Hulkamania era as well.

JUNE 23, 2003

WWF HISTORY

The recent series on the history of the WWF was fascinating reading. It brought back so many great memories. I'm sure many of your readers recall waiting up until midnight to watch Championship Wrestling on WOR every Saturday night.

I started watching in the middle of the Bob Backlund era in 1980. I enjoyed reading how his first two years of champion really went. Most of his MSG matches were shown live on the USA Network once a month. From the time I recall watching, he had his best matches with Ken Patera (the Texas death match), Don Muraco (a 60:00 draw), Greg Valentine and Jimmy Snuka.

Vince McMahon, working as the play-by-play man, really made it seem as if you were watching the big leagues of pro wrestling with the way he said, "Madison Square Garden."

Fast forward to 2003. The Backlash six-man tag contained six men who all held world titles at some point with Flair & HHH & Jericho vs. Nash & Michaels & Booker T. I wonder if that has ever happened anywhere before?

When I was in high school in May 1985, we had a party to watch the very first Saturday Night Main Event, with Hogan against Bob Orton, with Roddy Piper interfering. I turn on Smackdown 18 years later, almost to the day, and the show is built around Hogan and Piper going at it. At least I have memories of when it was somewhat interesting. I wonder what everyone else watching must have thought.

Steve Helwagen

Great work on the history pieces. The Fred Blassie story was very informative. Growing up in New York, I remember California wrestling with Blassie. As I kid I hated him, then as a teenager I thought he was hilarious. Do I remember correctly or not when I say there was an angle or actual event in 1975 or so when Blassie was jumped by a group of guys on the street?

As a subscriber for ten years and a fan for 30, I can remember slow periods in the business. I do not remember a period when the creative forces of the business were as lost as they are today as to what fans want.

How is a guy puking two nights in a row funny? Wrestling is never funny when it tries to be. It's only funny when the humor comes out naturally, like Blassie and Lou Albano in the old days. The main recipe for success in the late 70s was a forced reinvention of the product. With a thinning talent roster of established stars, the WWF had to create new stars and a new look. You had young guys kicking ass and telling each other off in the process. The guys were hungry and giving it their all and it showed. Now you've got guys mailing it in and trying to be clever. It's not a good formula.

Shaun Orcinolo

DM: Don't know about the Blassie story.

Just got done reading your history piece from late 80s. I especially fond the 1989 part of the article interesting,

particularly the matches with Flair and Steamboat. After reading the article, I popped in a tape of Chi-Town Rumble that I hadn't seen in a long time. Watching the match today, it was just as good as I thought it was when I first saw it. When I was watching it, I thought I saw you in the front row opposite the camera? Was that you? If so, what was it like being there for that match.

Ryan Droste

DM: It was me and I can't tell you how much fun it was.

I became a wrestling fan in the 80s in St. Louis from watching WCCW and the Von Erichs. The other show that aired was WWF. In 1987, I moved to Texas and became a fan of Crockett promotions. This was when cable started expanding. When I lived in St. Louis, I never saw the Crockett shows. 1989 was my favorite year as a wrestling fan. I'm 30 years old, and like many wrestlers who are 30 years old, I think the Flair vs. Steamboat matches were the best wrestling matches I've ever seen. One thing you forgot to mention was the ending of the 1989 Great American Bash where Steamboat chased Luger away with the chair. I feel if the company would have come to an agreement with Steamboat, he and Luger were going to be big draws against each other. Then again, it was WCW, and they probably would have flushed it down the tubes. Your point about Flair and Steamboat not drawing is something I didn't know. I just remember the incredible series of matches.

Pete Schirmacher

The double issue was one of the best. I'd rank it in the top ten. It was especially good because I started getting the newsletter in 1995, so I didn't know any of the news of the 80s. I knew some stuff, but not much. When I started watching wrestling, I only got the Apter mags. Even then I knew the stuff they wrote was fake, but I liked the pictures and the results because in those days, wins and losses meant something. It was sad reading how Vince got Zeus over as a huge draw on PPV with Hulk Hogan, and got Ultimate Warrior over huge, yet he screwed up Goldberg so bad.

I also read how Ron Garvin held Hawk down. What was the story on that? Did Ron Garvin get the nickname because he could hit so hard? Or was it just a made up gimmick. I also heard a story about Hulk Hogan hiding from Terry Funk in Japan in the early 80s because Funk was pissed at him for something.

Mike Malasev

DM: Garvin did a challenge where he said he could ride Hawk and Hawk couldn't escape. Anyway, Hawk couldn't escape. Garvin was a legitimately tough guy and I used to feel sorry for the job guys that he would torture on TV. I never felt sorry for the headliners, even though he was just as brutal on them. I know there was a story in the early 80s in Japan where Funk was one of the big foreign draws with All Japan and Hogan was one of the big foreign draws with New Japan when the rivalry was at its apex. They worked with each other in South Africa and I think Funk put Hogan over with the condition that neither would ever talk about the finish, or if they did, say it was a DQ. Hogan came back and talked about how he beat Funk, and at the time there was heat. But you have to realize the

nature of the wrestling war there at the time, and Funk being a booker, so he was a major part of the war.

As bad as the overall wrestling scene is this year, I've enjoyed the Observer more this year than any other. Starting with the WWF history through the last issue. It's amazing looking back on how Crockett dropped the ball with the UWF. History repeats itself. Both Crockett and WWE had hot products, that became stale, and both were given blessings right into their laps. In retrospect, McMahon didn't drop the ball as bad as Rhodes, but he dropped a much bigger ball.

J.R.Benson

JULY 28, 2003

The HHH vs. Bill Goldberg main event was officially announced for SummerSlam at a press conference on 7/22 in Los Angeles. The first televised confrontation was a somewhat forgettable deal where they went face-to-face at Raw the previous night at the Staples Center. While there was nothing wrong with the segment, as it was a basic deal where Goldberg invited all of Evolution to fight him and they walked away, it was never pushed for the rest of the show. Luckily, as Goldberg climbed the ropes after they left, he slipped, causing the place to laugh at him in almost a Shock Master like moment, but the cameras missed it, showing Evolution bailing. He showed the live crowd he was none too happy about it. With all the hype of Kane (since he's being set up for the real main eventers, the royal family) and finishing the show with him giving Linda McMahon the tombstone, when the show was over, the confrontation was not even an afterthought.

The press conference was attended by only about 250 fans even though it was pushed both on Raw and at the building the previous night. It was largely uneventful, just featuring Eric Bischoff, Goldberg and HHH and announcing only the top match. Bischoff put over Raw as the top show in WWE and the top show on cable TV. He talked about the success of the Raw only PPV and fans live actually booted all references to Smackdown. HHH talked about Goldberg saying that Goldberg isn't in a small pond where 176 people were set up to lose to him (I'm sure some can see the humor being that this press conference was designed to build up the match, not tear it down). He also ran down Goldberg's win over Rock, saying Rock was in Hollywood while he (HHH) beat Rock when he was at his best. The event lasted about 35 minutes and clips will no doubt be shown this coming week.

The first ever meeting between the two former real-life enemies took place the previous night at a house show in San Jose. The match was almost cursed, since HHH's leg wasn't doing well, as he was unable to run the ropes, and Goldberg's left arm was heavily bandaged from an operation to remove an infection.

The match had little in the way of special drawing power, as the show drew about 4,200 fans paying \$132,000, only slightly more than the 3,600 the Smackdown show did in the market in Oakland on 6/1.

HHH won the match with a low blow and schoolboy after interference from both Ric Flair and Randy Orton in 16:18 in a **3/4 match. The reaction to the three count was not the usual

heel cheats to win deal, as it took the air out of the crowd, even though Goldberg did get a big pop laying Orton out with a post-match jackhammer. It was clear Goldberg is a very unique case. The crowd wants to think he's special, but are ready to turn on him in a moment if they see him being exposed for not being special. It's as if they give him a chance and are with him huge, but when he fails, he's the target for the false faith. It's a psychology the company has no understanding of, and at this point it really doesn't matter because even though it's not irrevocable, they aren't going to get it right. Whether he wins or loses at SummerSlam at this point makes no difference. He's not there for the long haul, and whether he plays caretaker for the belt between HHH reigns, or just loses, it's a case of missed opportunity.

As many know, there was a lot of legit heat between the two. It stemmed from a radio interview HHH did when the promotional war had heated up and Goldberg was just about the hottest thing in wrestling except Steve Austin. When asked about Goldberg, HHH said that he didn't think WWF would even want him, pointing out his flaws. Goldberg confronted HHH, who was with Stephanie McMahon, at a Toy Fair some time later and caused a major scene, basically calling him out to fight, while HHH ignored him. It was not a stellar moment for anyone involved. Nevertheless, any problems between the two were settled almost as soon as Goldberg first got into the WWE locker room. HHH proposed a program with him, talked about working together, and made it clear he'd have no problems losing if Goldberg would agree to return the favor.

As for the match, it was good enough for a house show main event. It still needs some work before PPV, but having them go long on house shows is a good idea because Goldberg needs the ring time. They will be booked as frequently as Goldberg agrees to work between now and the end of August.

I don't think a long match is in their best interest at SummerSlam, but it doesn't matter, because that's what's going to happen.

The match itself was mainly stalling early. The first lock-up was at 2:00, followed by a lengthy collar-and-elbow and Goldberg holding a side headlock for two minutes. After a second Zbyszko stall by HHH, we were already at the 5:30 mark. After a flurry, Goldberg got an armbar, and HHH got a rope break, and then stalled. HHH got heat for the first two stalls, but with this third one, the crowd started turning on the match. By the time he was back in the ring, it was 7:00 in. From that point on, HHH did a good job of leading Goldberg, and Goldberg did a good enough job of following. It was best described as a low rent Ric Flair vs. Nikita Koloff match (not nearly as good as most of them, but probably better than the earliest ones). It was basic stuff, but Goldberg was in the right spot for most, and his punches and power moves looked very good. HHH was on target timing-wise with everything he did, and everything he called. The people were with them good, but certainly not great. Goldberg when he looked strong was very over with loud chants. The finish was the same thing you see every week on Raw. The ref goes down and Goldberg hit the spear, so no ref to count. HHH hit the pedigree and second ref Nick Patrick runs in to count the fall, but Goldberg kicked out. HHH attacked Patrick while Flair went after Goldberg. Orton then ran in, distracting for the HHH low blow from behind and a schoolboy for the three.

After producing one of the greatest years inside the ring of any company in history, World Championship Wrestling entered the 1990s with positive vibes. The belief was that they had the man who would carry the business over the next decade and bring them to profitability.

Sting was younger, better looking and far more athletic than the sport's biggest star, Hulk Hogan, who himself was branching out to movies and it appeared his days as a full-time performer were winding down. WWF recognized that and wanted to move Hogan into the Bruno Sammartino position during the Bob Backlund reign, as the legend who would come back when needed and vanquish the heels. The focus of the promotion would be on the full-time champion, the Ultimate Warrior. WCW was confident that in the battle of the two guys who started wrestling together, they had the right guy. Warrior was slightly bigger and more muscular, and this was the age of steroid muscle being in, but Sting was so far superior in the ring. While neither was a good interview, Sting at least could speak coherently. Both companies tried to follow the success of Hogan in marketing to young children. Sting would do promos talking about the "Little Stingers," similar to what Hogan did in the 80s, while Warrior talked about the "Little Warriors."

But it never clicked for either guy. Ten years later, Hogan and Ric Flair were regarded by fans as all-time legends. Warrior was a mysterious basket case and Sting was always a star, but he never broke through as expected.

But the biggest news at the start of the year was another Vince McMahon fight with the cable industry. As it was a year earlier, in 1989, which led to the second Super Sunday, this time, in 1990, McMahon's target were Request TV and Viewers Choice (which after mergers, reorganizations and name changes would be equivalent to InDemand today). He was fighting to eliminate them from the picture, feeling they weren't needed, and thus pick up another five percent of the PPV revenue for himself. While McMahon made the move of bypassing the two companies and trying to get the individual systems cleared on his own, there was a major hurdle. Because of cross-ownership, about 42% of the cable systems had a minority ownership interest at the time by either Request or Viewers Choice. When McMahon said he was syndicating the shows himself, those systems immediately decided not to carry his shows. Another 23% were leaning toward Request and Viewers Choice in the fight, since those companies supplied them with all their PPV programming including boxing, the most lucrative event of all, leaving McMahon with only about one-third of the systems in his corner as he went to fight. McMahon, at the time, provided four big events per year.

Publicly, McMahon took a different tact. The company claimed on its television shows, starting with a telegram read by Gene Okerlund, that numerous cable companies wouldn't be carrying the Royal Rumble, and hinted that they wouldn't carry Wrestlemania either. The company claimed it was un-American and unconstitutional that the cable companies wouldn't let the viewers decide what they could watch, and told them to contact your company and demand they let you see the Royal Rumble. Like the previous year, and for that matter, like another publicized fight in late 2001 with DirecTV, this ended up being settled under the same terms as before. Unlike in 2001-2002, McMahon settled just before the Rumble, thus not leaving millions on the table in a fight he couldn't win. Just before the Rumble, he signed a seven-year contract with the Viewers Choice.

Japan also started to become a battleground for the WCW vs. WWF war, which, because of the size of the two parent companies, was the biggest national promotional war in North American history. WCW had a working relationship with New Japan Pro Wrestling, but it fell apart when Ric Flair was pulled from the February 10, 1990 main event where he would defend the NWA title against Keiji Muto (who had become a huge star in Japan from his photos in the magazines as the first Japanese wrestler to become a legitimate national superstar in the U.S. since Giant Baba nearly 30 years earlier) at the company's second ever event in the Tokyo Dome. With Flair out, New Japan had to go to All Japan to save the show. When tickets sold out far in advance due to the interpromotional matches and did a \$3.2 million gate, double what WWF had done for its Pontiac Silverdome show, everyone in wrestling took notice of the revenues of doing a big event there. Not only that, but because of network political issues, the major interpromotional matches couldn't even air on television. A special, four nights later, featuring the debut of Koji Kitao (which was a huge deal at the time) drew a 23.2 rating. The show also featured the first ever meeting of Stan Hansen, All Japan's all-time greatest foreigner, and Big Van Vader, New Japan's top foreign monster. The other huge television match, at the time, was Steve Williams, reputed at the time the "real life toughest" American and Salman Hashimikov, a Soviet wrestling legend who Williams "ate up," in the ring.

Giant Baba and Vince McMahon, probably the two greatest promoters of their generation, worked together. Each needed the other, at least at first, for a show of that magnitude. But due to conflicting egos and ideas about what pro wrestling was, it was also just about guaranteed there would only be one show, because they'd never be able to get along. It took place on April 13, 1990. New Japan, mad at WCW, joined in for the "U.S. and Japan Wrestling Summit," although at the end, New Japan's bookers didn't want to play the booking game of who does what jobs for whom, so they decided they would participate, but New Japan wrestlers would only wrestle each other.

All sorts of major things were going on at the same time. Hulk Hogan won the Royal Rumble on January 21, 1990, throwing out Curt Hennig at a sold out Orlando Arena. This didn't appear to make much sense, since Hogan was already WWF champion. In hindsight, it may have been a consolation prize, since Hogan would be dropping the title to Warrior at Wrestlemania. The show drew 260,000 buys on PPV, which wasn't all that much better than WCW events at the time were doing.

Even bigger, McMahon got his third NBC prime time special on February 23, 1990 at the Joe Louis Arena, and was looking for something bigger than the record-setting Hogan vs. Andre NBC match two years earlier. His idea? Mike Tyson, who the week he signed him, was probably the biggest sports star in the world. He'd match Hogan, his biggest star, with Randy Savage, who did record business with Hogan at the previous Wrestlemania, with Tyson as referee. Just days after that announcement was made, giving WWE huge mainstream publicity, McMahon was at Korakuen Hall in Tokyo, in the middle of the ring, shaking hands with Baba. WCW, by pulling Flair, caused a rift that wound up with Muto also not appearing, but also maneuvered themselves out of what appeared to be the biggest show in history.

The night before New Japan and All Japan sold out the Tokyo Dome, Tyson had a title defense against what appeared to be

a tomato can named Buster Douglas in the same building, which was barely half full. In one of the biggest boxing upsets in history, Douglas knocked out the overrated and under prepared Tyson, sending both Don King and McMahon into a tizzy. Tyson, emotionally broken down after his first title loss, pulled out of the show. McMahon ended up contacting Douglas, who agreed to take his place, but no doubt the record viewership of having Hogan, Savage and Tyson in one ring, looked out the window.

WCW was undergoing its own problems. They ran an angle after Sting won the Starrcade tournament, beating Flair in a babyface battle which was to symbolically make Sting the biggest babyface in the company. Flair had no problem with it, since he was the booker, and had decided to turn back heel. They immediately reformed The Four Horsemen, with Flair, Arn & Ole Anderson, and Sting, all as babyfaces.

The main event for WCW's first PPV of the year on February 25 was to be Flair's title loss to Sting in what at the time was being pushed as a babyface match of friends. To set it up, the Horsemen, just weeks after being put together, out of nowhere fired Sting. This happened on a live Clash of Champions on February 6 in Corpus Christi, which drew a 4.5 rating. Ole Anderson, doing an Academy Award job of playing the ultimate heel, told Sting he was being kicked out of the Horsemen. He went on to say Sting had until the end of the show to give up his title match with Flair, or they were going to end his career. Of course, the idea was at that moment, that they would, at the end of the show, try, and Sting would overcome them all to build interest in his title win. But by the end of the night, Anderson's words would take on a more chilling meaning.

The original plan, which few were aware of, is that Sting would be kicked out and replaced on the show by Tully Blanchard, reforming the original group, and going back heel. Blanchard's career had been dead since Jim Herd refused to sign him after he had failed a test for cocaine right after giving his notice to WWF. The show was to end with Sting and Flair brawling off the air after Sting dispatched the other three Horsemen. The main event on the show was a cage match where the remaining three Horsemen turned heel so effectively that the crowd was 100% behind heels Muta & Buzz Sawyer & Dragon Master (Kazuo Sakurada) in a cage. Sting charged the cage and was climbing up, but pulled down by a number of wrestlers. As he was being pulled down from the cage, his leg was caught and he tore his patella tendon. He would need reconstructive surgery, and would be out for five months. In fact, by the end of the night, there was very serious fear his career was over, as Anderson had said. About a week later, the news was more tempered. Sting would return, but the Sting era would have to be delayed by a few months.

The original Horsemen never came together. Flair, who was booker and intermediary, got Blanchard to agree to come in. Jim Herd, who ran WCW, offered him \$156,000 per year for a maximum 176 dates. When Blanchard, who was backstage in Corpus Christi ready to make his surprising return, saw the contract, the number of dates on it read 300 maximum. He refused to sign, tempers flared, and just like that, all negotiations were over. To make matters worse, Muta quit after the show. Muta had become a huge star in the U.S., and because of it, became a big wrestling magazine star in Japan. When the company pulled him from the Tokyo Dome and his chance to return in such a high profile match with Flair, combined with the treatment at Starrcade, he wanted to return to New Japan. WCW offered him a babyface turn, which had

been proposed almost since the day he arrived but Gary Hart had constantly been able to block, and a shoe deal (the famed "Roos" sponsorship put together by Herd), but it wasn't enough. He returned to Japan, and became New Japan's biggest star a few years later during a period when they were the unquestioned top promotion in the world.

In a quandary, WCW came up with the panic idea to turn Lex Luger back babyface and face Flair. They had hardly gotten the mileage out of the Luger heel turn, but with Sting out and Flair having just turned, there seemed to be no other option at the time. The Flair turn this time did pay some initial dividends. In what turned out to be the biggest weekend for ratings on TBS in years, and would be until the next boom period, Flair, as a new heel, drew a 4.6 rating on February 17 for a match with mid-carder Brian Pillman, and carried it to **** levels. The next day, he and Arn Anderson beat Ricky Morton & Robert Gibson on the Sunday show in what was one of the best matches of that year in the U.S., and also did a 4.6 rating for the match. With cable growing, both matches, viewed in 2.47 million homes, ended up as the most viewers in the history of TBS for any weekly pro wrestling (as opposed to a special like the Clash) in history. Flair, who was wrestling full-time and booking, was feeling like he was about to be glad-handed by everyone for how hot the angle seemed to be, at least from a TV ratings standpoint and the Turner higher-ups were more concerned with ratings than house show attendance, which was not doing well. Instead, Herd told Flair those numbers were hardly satisfactory and TBS was expecting 5's. Upon hearing that, the pressure that was aging Flair and at times affecting his ring performance, caused him to bust. He quit as booker.

The loss of Tyson may have killed shots at a record, but the February 23 live prime time NBC special from Detroit did a 12.8 rating as Hogan beat Savage to keep his title, as the final hurdle before the Hogan vs. Warrior title change, making it the second most watched pro wrestling match ever in the U.S. Savage also did his job in complaining to Douglas after the match, putting his hands on the new world heavyweight boxing champion, and taking the big bump from a punch.

February 25 was the 41st birthday of Flair. Flair had lied about his age from the day he got into wrestling, and virtually everyone in the company, as well as his most loyal fans sitting at ringside ("Happy 30th birthday" banners), thought it was even more symbolic, birthday No. 40 at what many considered his most successful building of his career. He was back at the Greensboro Coliseum. The company seemed to have some momentum, drawing 9,894 fans and 210,000 buys on PPV, almost as much as the Rumble a month earlier.

This double turn was so effective that even in Greensboro, Luger had 90% of the crowd support. It also had a unique moment. At the 3:00 mark, a big fight broke out in the stands. Nobody took their eyes off the ring to watch the fight. In more than 30 years of attending live wrestling, this may have been the only time I've ever witnessed such a thing. Sting came to ringside to cheer Luger on, but was attacked by Ole & Arn Anderson. Luger, who had Flair in the torture rack, dropped him to help his buddy Sting. In doing so, he ended up counted out of the ring in 38:07 of a ****½ match. However, due to the match going so long and time constraints, they were off the air for the planned climactic scene, where Luger, Sting and the Steiner Brothers made up.

But in trying to combat WWF with harder hitting wrestling, and particularly with the Steiner Brothers as top babyfaces, the injury list was long. The Horsemen fell apart almost immediately. Arn Anderson suffered a herniated disc in his neck and Ole, also banged up from the Steiners, was made a manager (of a masked tag team called, creatively enough, the Minnesota Wrecking Crew, which consisted of Wayne Bloom & Mike Enos) and eventually, the new booker. At the same time, what turned out to be the biggest news story of this period started on the TV show "Entertainment Tonight," which interviewed Superstar Billy Graham. Some months earlier Los Angeles TV reporter Fred Rogan won an award for his piece where he interviewed Graham coming out of hip replacement surgery, attributed by his doctor to his decades of steroid use. Graham and Bruno Sammartino were interviewed, and talked about the problem reaching epidemic proportions in pro wrestling. The WWF breathed a heavy sigh of relief, because even though Graham stated he believed 90 percent of the WWF wrestlers were on steroids (a figure in the ballpark of what company wrestlers corroborated under oath when McMahon was on trial), he never fingered anyone, most notably Hulk Hogan, who the company marketed as a hero to children, his long-time friend. Less than two years later, things would be very different.

With the Hogan loss to Warrior scheduled a week later, Herd wanted to jump the gun on the title change. Ever since the Greensboro match, with the screw job ending, there was a furor of office people wanting Flair to drop the title to Luger. Flair had agreed to drop it to Sting, and it appeared a Flair-Sting match should be the company's biggest match ever. But patience was wearing thin, and Herd decided to be penny-wise and pound-foolish, throwing away the Flair-Sting potential on PPV and getting the belt on Luger at a house show. Going into the week, the office had planned for Flair to lose the title on March 24 in St. Louis. The taped Sunday show had holes left in it for Jim Ross and Missy Hyatt to come on live, and announce that the title had changed the previous night. During the week, the plan changed instead to do it on March 23 in Chicago. Either it was the company working its employees, since everyone in the company was sent to St. Louis for the title change. More likely, it was because word of the change in St. Louis had gotten out (and in those days, the term "gotten out" would mean a few dozen people in the world tops because even this newsletter, which was the major source of inside info during that period, didn't have the title change ahead of time), and they decided to change plans. Flair, at the time, had a clause in his contract regarding dropping of the title, stating that he had to be informed in writing ahead of time. That was never done.

In Chicago before the show, a profanity laced argument between Flair and Herd, the blow-up from everything over the past year took place. Flair refused to drop the title, both in Chicago and the next night in St. Louis. His argument was that he had promised the belt to Sting, as had the company, and going to Luger would be throwing away what appeared to be the company's biggest potential money making match and long-term program. While it made no sense to lose to Luger, the number of people who internally thought the problem was that Flair was too old to draw from the kids audience had built up to where they decided they couldn't wait for the summer. Ultimately, this story had repercussions many years down the line. Luger never forgave Flair for not putting him over, and when Luger had power during the NWO Wolfpac glory days, particularly when his buddy Kevin Nash was booker, what happened at that time was nobody's paranoia or imagination.

Luger, wanting revenge for many years earlier, got Nash to constantly book Flair in embarrassing situations, with the idea of driving Flair crazy enough to where he would quit. Nash told friends the other reason, besides helping his buddy gain revenge, for the booking. If Flair quit, with his big salary, the idea was that the top guys could all go in and ask for another raise.

Hogan was no happier losing to Warrior. While he had movie commitments that were going to take him away from wrestling for a few months, he didn't like the idea of losing to Warrior. He would have rather lost via a screw-job to a heel and for him to come back for revenge. Besides, Warrior had incredible momentum. At all the arenas, when the announcers would talk about the impending Wrestlemania match, the fans, getting behind what they thought was the new thing, would thunderously cheer Warrior's name, and boo Hogan's. There was no question the atmosphere backstage at Sky Dome in Toronto was that this would an historic night. The company saw it as the passing of the torch, and a torch that had never been passed in this way in its history. All the previous WWF top babyface eras used the heel transition champion. Pedro Morales never beat Bruno Sammartino. Nor did Sammartino beat Morales. And their only meeting in many ways was a huge disappointment. Bob Backlund never beat Sammartino, nor did they even consider Hogan beating Backlund. While Hogan had his fluke loss to Andre in the NBC match, he actually kicked out and it was a heel ref deal (ironically enough, with Earl Hebner playing the heel ref). In the people's eyes, they had never really seen him lose. The other risk is that, on paper, this was a terrible match.

The Sky Dome was packed for Mania. The actual paid attendance was 61,864 (with 64,287 in the building, although it was announced as 67,678) and the gate of \$3,490,857 U.S. broke the New Japan Tokyo Dome record of a few months earlier. It did about 550,000 PPV buys on PPV, which was a disappointment at the time, attributed at the time to the fact that two babyfaces, even of that level, would not draw as well on PPV as a babyface vs. heel feud among top guys. But contrary to lore, it was not Hogan vs. Warrior that drew the crowd as much as the name "Wrestlemania." The truth was, there were more than 40,000 tickets sold immediately, before Hogan vs. Warrior was ever announced (although it wouldn't have taken a genius to figure out that was the direction). Sales actually slowed down once the match was announced, but it was still a sellout, albeit a last day version. In what was one of the best put together matches up to that point in history, Warrior pinned Hogan in 22:39. As it turned out, even though crowds booed Hogan's name, Hogan's presence was such that he was cheered far more than Warrior, although there were few boos for either man. In a knock on Sting, Hogan took a bump out of the ring, and the announcers made sure to note that he may have torn his patella tendon (the real injury that had kept Sting out of action). Hogan recovered in just 30 seconds from an injury that was going to keep Sting out for five months. The finish was supposed to be Warrior doing a press slam. But he was so tired by that point he couldn't get Hogan up. No matter, the announcers claimed he did anyway. Warrior did a splash, but Hogan kicked out. Hogan did his usual superman comeback, but missed the legdrop, leading to Warrior hitting the splash for the win in what ended up being one of the most famous matches of Hogan's career, and without question the high point of Warrior's. The highlight of the entire show, as it turned out, was Hogan going into business for himself, grabbing the belt and handing it to Warrior. Hogan had worked the match of his career, and people were sad to

see him go. Because of how Hogan handled the spotlight, the story wasn't what WWF thought it was, the triumphant title win from Warrior over the biggest wrestling star who ever lived, as much as, "What a great guy Hogan is even when losing." The camera shot was Warrior in the ring holding the belt with fireworks, while Hogan slowly and sadly faded into the background. Hogan was probably the only one that day who "got it."

The fans felt sorry for Hogan. Whether Warrior as champ didn't work because fans resented him for replacing Hogan, or because they had no fresh challengers set up for him, or simply because he didn't have what took to be a champion in the first place can all be argued. What can't be argued is that it didn't work, which would be the theme of 1990.

Both were off to Japan for the combined show with All Japan and New Japan.

The U.S. and Japan Wrestling Summit was actually something of a disappointment, failing to sellout, with 41,000 paying \$2.1 million. With Baba and Vince working together and different ideas on wrestling, problems were everywhere. They couldn't agree on big things, and even on little things. Baba, who advertised Hogan defending the WWF title against Terry Gordy as the main event, felt McMahon had acted in bad faith by not letting him know until two weeks ahead of time about the title switch, and felt the card was weakened because Warrior vs. DiBiase as the title match meant nothing in Japan. Even though he would have had to have announced Hogan vs. Gordy as the title match before Mania, he felt it was professional courtesy to let him know ahead of time, so he could be ready with the new Warrior vs. Ted DiBiase title match.

Baba had wanted Hogan against either Jumbo Tsuruta or Genichiro Tenryu, figuring correctly, those matches would do the best business. WWF wouldn't agree. NTV (which did a 14.1 rating for the show) even considered canceling the TV special because when they agreed, it was for a Hogan title defense, and Japanese TV executives didn't know, or care about Warrior. But arguments ranged from where the ring (WWF wanted the ring in the home plate area, and would shoot TV from one side where they wanted all the fans sitting, to avoid empty seats, but that would leave fans in the outfield section with a terrible view, whereas Baba wanted the ring in the middle of the field so all spectators would have a fair view), to whether time counts would be announced. The third match on the show was a 20:00 draw, ironically between two wrestlers who would go on to be 90s legends, Mitsuharu Misawa, as Tiger Mask, against Bret Hart. In All Japan, you did time calls, five minutes, ten minutes, etc. But in the alternating between English and Japanese ring announcers, this match saw Mel Phillips as ring announcer, and he followed WWF protocol, with no time calls. Instead of saying one minute to go, 30 seconds go, to build excitement to the finish, they did WWF style, and the bell ran out of nowhere, causing a flat finish. Earlier in the show there was legit heat in a tag where Jimmy Snuka opposed Kenta Kobashi. Snuka had a flying gimmick, but Kobashi had taken it to a different level. Snuka, once a big star in Japan, believed him to be stepping on his gimmick. And on and on it went.

WWF did not make many demands when it came to finishes, only that Hogan and Warrior both had to win. With DiBiase, then a WWF wrestler, as Warrior's foe, that was not an issue. Gordy, however, refused to do the job for Hogan, feeling that

he had to make his living in Japan as a top foreigner, and Hogan didn't, and the reason he couldn't win at first, the WWF title, was no longer part of the picture. As it turned out, when Gordy backed out, to save the show, Hansen, a bigger star than Gordy, volunteered to do the job. Hansen understood the big picture, because he became a bigger star losing to Hogan. The Japanese fans knew "he shouldn't," since Japan was his home turf and he was a bigger star than Hogan there. By understanding he voluntarily did so to save the show, it added a dimension, doing what is best for business and "saving the show" that was falling apart to the Hansen character after 13 years on top.

Eight days later, Warrior was back in the U.S. for his first regular house show as champion, against Mr. Perfect, before 4,700 fans in Providence. Things were off to a bad start. WWF fed Warrior Perfect and Rick Rude, Perfect, because he was considered the company's best worker and Warrior needed to be carried. But people didn't see Perfect, who Hogan always beat, as a viable, fresh title contender. Rude was the only guy with a high profile pin on Warrior (actually the only pinfall loss he'd taken in a few years in the company in the match where Rude won the IC title). However, Warrior had long since avenged that loss everywhere, and people didn't see Rude as a viable contender either.

On television after Mania, WWF figurehead president Jack Tunney in his manner that everyone made fun of, explained that the Hogan-Warrior match was so brutal that he would refuse to sanction a rematch. Actually the plan was to hold a rematch the next year, since they had booked the gigantic Los Angeles Coliseum for Wrestlemania VII. The ad campaign had already started talking about seeing wrestling for the first time before more than 100,000 fans.

Before Hogan left to do a movie, a new huge heel, the 400 plus pound Earthquake (John Tenta) squashed Hogan and injured him at the end of April, putting the company's entire focus all summer on Warrior. After the worst summer since its national expansion, they kept trying to change Warrior's look, thinking that was the problem. Within a few months, an audible was called. Sgt. Slaughter, fired at just about the peak of his popularity, when some thought he actually rivaled Hogan in late 1984, only to lead to diminishing returns for the AWA and other companies who tried to build around him, returned after nearly six years. He started in a series of vignettes talking about how America had gotten soft. He was going to play an anti-American heel. There was a cold war going on, so he was aligned with Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

WCW's next PPV show after Wrestle War was May 19, called Capital Combat, from the old DC Armory in Washington, DC, headlined by a Flair vs. Luger cage match before a sellout 7,500 paying \$98,000 and about 195,000 PPV buys. In a cross promotion, it was billed as "The Return of Robocop." Robocop was a movie series that was about to release a sequel, and Herd forced the booking committee, against all of their wishes, to do an angle where the latest version of the Horsemen (Arn & Ole Anderson & Sid Vicious) had thrown the injured Sting into a cage. Luckily, a guy in a Robocop suit was there, bending the gimmicked steel bars, ripped its door from its hinges, while the heels had to run off in fear. It was very controversial, but in reality, it was short, and while stupid, the crowd didn't boo it and it was over fast enough to where it wasn't painful.

Luger, who suffered a staph infection a few weeks earlier, literally came out of the hospital to work the show, since there

was no alternative. He wasn't even 50% for the match, and plans for him to juice were changed due to his infection. To his credit, under the circumstances, he did a very good job. Flair was able to carry it to a good match, although nowhere near the level of their Greensboro match. And it had an even worse finish than the two previous PPV matches. The cage magically raised up just as Luger had Flair in the torture rack, and Barry Windham hit the ring for a DQ. But at least there would be no problem with the next PPV, since it was the Sting title win.

In a surprise on the show, making an appearance as Flair's interim challenger before the Sting return was the 323-pound Junkyard Dog. The Dog has been a huge star in Mid South Wrestling, although he was 60 pounds lighter when he first got over. He was the best drawing African American wrestler in a territory in history. He was one of the first big names to jump when WWF went national, and for a time was the No. 2 babyface behind Hogan. But drug and weight issues cost him his job, and in those days for a star to get fired over drug issues, they had to be to a scary degree. Ole Anderson, looking for something from the past, went with the old racial angle with the idea of a black babyface to get that audience back. However, Dog was too far gone, and no longer had his drawing power or even his original charisma being so overweight. Worse, he was so far gone that in the ring, it was remembered as the worst series of matches of Flair's career. The man who managed to get passable matches out of El Gigante, the 7-6 1/2 and 425 pound former Argentinean Olympic basketball star who had no clue in the ring, could not even come close with the experienced JYD. Luckily, Sting was coming soon.

The coronation of Sting took place on July 7 in Baltimore. It was Sting's first match back, two months before doctors advised him to return. Sting took his leap frogs, dives and top rope moves out of his repertoire to protect his fragile knee. Sting reversed a figure four into an inside cradle in 16:05. It was far from the best match the two would have, but under the circumstances it was all that really could have been expected. In Sting's eyes, it was the most memorable, because the post match title pop was among the most impressive of its time, it was the match of his career.

Happy days were supposed to be here again. While the show did 235,000 buys, a new record for the company, there was a reality that some noted at the building. Baltimore had been a hot NWA/WCW market for years by this point, and from a hype standpoint, this was its biggest match ever. However, the paid attendance was only 8,900 for a \$150,000 house. When the building wasn't sold out after all that hype and all that time, it was clear that Sting wasn't going to be the overwhelming success. Worse, with the exception of rematches with Flair, which figured not to draw anything special, there was no real title contender on the horizon unless they did another Luger turn, or pushed Sid Vicious, who had the charisma, but that feud had its risks. Sting vs. Sid could hardly be expected to satisfy the fans spoiled by years of Flair world title matches. When Sting's first title matches around the horn, with Flair, did not draw well, the feeling was it was time to put Flair out to pasture, as he was too old. But Sting's matches drew even worse when others were put in Flair's spot.

Like with WWF and Warrior, WCW had created a new babyface champion, but didn't have fresh heels ready to draw against him top. Ole Anderson's answer to the problem was The Black Scorpion. A mysterious foe, supposedly from Sting's past, had come back to haunt him. They hired magicians to

physically play the role, while Anderson, one of the business' all-time great talkers, used a distorted voice machine to do the promos. In typical wrestling fashion, Anderson knew how to start it, but had no idea what to do next.

The biggest news of the summer was a contract dispute between McMahon and heel announcer Jesse Ventura. Ventura started announcing nearly six years earlier, at a time when it was considered somewhat novel to have a heel knock the babyfaces alongside the regular babyface advocating announcer on commentary. Ventura was such a success that the heel announcer role has remained a mainstay in wrestling for nearly two decades. However, Ventura was offered a video game deal. McMahon told him not to take it, because he felt it was competition for his own video games. Ventura noted that his contract didn't prohibit him from taking it. McMahon and Ventura were two stubborn men, both not used to seeing things any other way but their own. Neither would back down, and Ventura was let go. In his place, McMahon brought back Roddy Piper as an announcer. As it turned out, while few would say Piper was a better announcer, he had become such a huge star from being one of the architects of the first Mania and doing a few movies that weekly ratings went up noticeably at this point. During the fall of 1990, for one of the few years in history, the ratings for Prime Time Wrestling (in the time slot that turned into Raw a few years later), actually increased going head-to-head with Monday Night Football, and Piper was the only difference.

The Hogan return, going for revenge against Earthquake was the main event for SummerSlam on August 27 in Philadelphia, before a sold out Spectrum with 19,304 paying \$338,452. All summer long, WWF had compiled a mailing list asking fans to write get well letters to Hogan, making his return a huge deal. In fact, SummerSlam did about the same number of buys, 550,000, as the Hogan-Warrior Mania match had done, again showing babyface vs. heel was a bigger deal than legendary babyface vs. legendary babyface, just as the Sammartino-Morales match had shown Vince's father 18 years earlier. It was one of only two years (1997 being the other) where Mania didn't outdistance every other show during the year. Hogan's return didn't help Warrior any, because now the champion was clearly second banana, although he ended his summer-long feud with Rude by winning a cage match.

The debut of the Black Scorpion was at a live Clash of the Champions on September 5 in Asheville, NC. Again, they figured out how to start a program, but didn't know what to do. Al Perez, a mid-level star whose good looks fooled some promoters into thinking he could draw, but his lack of charisma was enough to keep that from happening, was put under the mask. It was a disaster, as Flair was put in the semi-final against Luger. That was the only match on the show to get any kind of heat, and blew away everything on the show. It was a weird deal, as announcer Jim Ross was trying to portray Flair as the best of all-time as he carried Luger to the usual good match. However, the finish saw Luger attacked by Hansen to set up a program, with Flair seemingly having nothing to do. The Sting-Scorpion match was bad live, going 8:30, as Perez was told to disguise his ring style, which left him with little he could do. At the end, Sting was attacked by Dave Sheldon, claiming to be the real Black Scorpion. While the show drew only 4,000 and was not good, people were happy a few days later when it came back with a 5.0 rating, and that Flair and Sting's matches did a 6.8, or 3.75 million viewers, breaking the record set the previous year by the Flair-Funk I Quit match as the most watched matches in cable history. It was hard to say

whether it was the idea of the first TV Flair-Luger match (they had only worked house shows and PPV and was one of the time period's biggest feuds) was the draw, or the Scorpion angle, but since the latter was the idea of the booker, it got the credit. Unfortunately, that meant Sting vs. Scorpion rematches were booked to headline the house shows. That didn't do much business, and even worse, left people that did go with a bad taste in their mouth with subpar main events. Fans of the product, used to seeing Flair world title matches, were going to house shows and seeing Sting defend against the masked guy of the night. The crowd reaction the first night wasn't good, but it did do big numbers on TV. At the house shows, it was worse, as people like Sheldon, Perez, Bill Irwin, Randy Culley and Tony Zane were suddenly in main events to an audience that had seen too many great title matches to put up with bad ones. They also kept the angle going until Starrcade, long past its death, and it resulted in a weak buy rate. That show was also notable for a tag team prelim match. A new giant team, called The Master Blasters, both in their first pro match, were set for a big push because of their size. They were fed Brad Armstrong & Tim Horner, two good workers who were thought to be able to carry almost anyone. "Almost" being the key word. The match was such a disaster that one of the Blasters drove back home immediately after the match in shame. The other didn't. His name was Kevin Nash.

The year was sputtering to a close. WWF started letting people go. Rude quit the company after a financial argument. He tore his triceps, but the company was still advertising him for main event matches with Warrior. Haku took his place. While Warrior vs. Rude wasn't knocking them dead, Warrior vs. Haku would have done far worse, which is why the company never acknowledged Rude's injury or changed advertising. Rude believed that since they were using his name in all the ads, even while knowing he wouldn't be there, that the company must have thought his name was a draw, and he was responsible for drawing the houses. He thought he was entitled to payoffs from those shows. The company felt differently. Rude was also unhappy about his SummerSlam payoff, since he believed he was the main event on a show that did very well, but really it was Hogan vs. Earthquake that was the draw, and who got main event pay, although Warrior also did and Rude didn't. Rude had several months left on his contract, so he couldn't jump to WCW when healthy, although he eventually went there and became one of the company's biggest stars for a few years. With business at its worst level since the early expansion, the company let more than a dozen wrestlers go, and cut down from three tours to two, with the idea one would be headlined by Hogan, and the other by Warrior. Warrior was at this point showing his first life as a draw, largely because he was booked with Savage. While Hogan was drawing better, his feud with Earthquake was about to run its course.

From an in-ring standpoint, the most famous story from this period was the phantom title change. The Hart Foundation, Bret Hart and brother-in-law Jim Neidhart, were the tag team champions. Neidhart was on the list of those being let go, with the idea of breaking Hart out into a single. The decision was made for them to drop the belts to The Rockers, Shawn Michaels & Marty Jannetty, who were one of the few hot acts in the AWA as the Midnight Rockers, an attempted copy of the Rock & Roll Express. On October 30 in Fort Wayne, IN, the first title change involving Hart and Michaels took place. However, the company, after this match, changed its mind about Hart as a single, since he was too small by their headliner standards. Neidhart wasn't fired, and the title

change, taped for television, never aired. Locally it was announced that since the ring ropes broke during the match, it was ruled as if it had never taken place. It was an ironic first title change between the two guys who would be WWF's biggest stars a few years later. A few weeks later, the best in-ring tag team of that era, the Midnight Express, broke up when the problems between Herd and Jim Cornette reached a fever pitch and Cornette walked out. Stan Lane walked out with him, although later he would regret that decision, giving up on a \$125,000 a year job. Bobby Eaton stayed, although his career never came close to where it was and largely consisted of being given one failed gimmick after another. Anyone remember Lord Robert Eaton from England?

Ventura rebounded from being let go by McMahon, by becoming a national curiosity. The former wrestler won election, in a huge upset and by a wide margin, as mayor of the Brooklyn Park, MN, a suburb of Minneapolis.

Dusty Rhodes then gave notice to WWF. Ole Anderson was fired at WCW's booker. Rhodes, as told by Jack Petrik, denied to everyone that he was coming in as booker, even Sam Muchnick when he point blank asked him. Later, Jim Herd found out that, behind his back, Jack Petrik had made a deal to bring Rhodes back.

Halloween Havoc for WCW on October 27 was the first PPV of what was supposed to be the post-Flair era. Sting vs. Sid Vicious was the main event. The match stunk, although it was no fault of Sting's. The finish saw Barry Windham dress up as Sting and replace Sting while Flair and Arn Anderson caused a distraction. Sid pinned Windham, dressed as Sting, to apparently win the title in a finish that was creative enough to almost save a bad match. As Sid celebrated with the belt, the real Sting ran in, with rope around his wrist, with the idea he'd been tied up but had broken free, hit Sid with the title belt, and cradled him to retain the title. The show drew 7,000 paid, with a near full house of 8,000 total at the UIC Pavilion, and the \$115,000 house was the company's third best of the year. It did about 200,000 buys on PPV, on par with what shows were doing earlier in the year. But what was best remembered from the show was a wild match between the Steiner Brothers and Nasty Boys that finished high in Match of the Year rankings, with Scott and Brian Knobs inadvertently inventing a new move, the Frankensteiner where the guy doesn't go all the way over, and lands on his head like a DDT. This was a rare case where he messed up finish looked even more devastating than what was supposed to happen, and ended up making the match by doing so.

The WWF's final big event of the year was Survivor Series in Hartford on November 22. It failed to sellout the Civic Center, doing 13,000 paying \$216,000, and did another 400,000 buys on PPV. Warrior was champion, but was put in the opener, teaming with the former Road Warriors, now called Legion of Doom, and the Texas Tornado, the new name for Kerry Von Erich, against Demolition, now a three-man unit of Bill Eadie (who had already given notice and was about to sue the company) & Barry Darsow & Brian Adams & Mr. Perfect, ending when Warrior pinned Perfect clean with his splash. Hogan was put in the main event position, teaming with Jim Duggan & Tugboat Fred Ottman & Big Bossman over Earthquake & Dino Bravo & Haku & Barbarian, with Hogan pinning Barbarian to win. They did a deal at the end where all the winners of previous matches would come back, so Hogan & Warrior & Tito Santana ended the show beating Ted DiBiase & Rick Martel & Hercules & Paul Roma & Warlord.

WCW ended the year, as it always did, with Starrcade. Herd brought the big show to St. Louis, his home town, and tried to do a home town flavor. The main event was scheduled to be the blow-off of the Black Scorpion angle. By this time, it had long since sputtered, along with Sting's title reign. While the night of Starrcade '89, the feeling among many in the company was that "there would be no No. 7," in reference to the fact Flair would never get the title again, a year later, the historical and mythical No. 7 (actually not an accurate number but it was the number they were using at the time, which was to theoretically tie Harley Race's all-time record) was right around the corner as the acknowledgment was it just didn't work out with Sting. The same acknowledgment was being made with Warrior, as the decision was made to put over the now evil Sgt. Slaughter as the interim champion, leading to the first crowd of 100,000 fans in pro wrestling history when he dropped it back to Hogan.

One year earlier, it was a new decade and the new stars were to be anointed. Now, both companies realized the game had changed. There was more to making a champion that met the eye. The days of waving the magic wand and it working because the belt was powerful enough were over. For the belt to mean something, it had to have who the fans believed was a real champion holding it. And fans were getting more fickle than ever before.

In the weeks before Starrcade, the company had gone back and forth between Flair and Windham as the eventual Black Scorpion, who would unmask. They settled on Flair, to lead to Flair regaining the title at a house show in New York a few weeks later. The decision making process was more interesting than the two main title matches.

Flair was to be the Scorpion, so a very bad angle was shot where Flair was kidnaped and worked over by some Atlanta masked thugs, and injured. Tag champs Doom (Ron Simmons & Butch Reed) were announced as facing Barry Windham & Arn Anderson for the belts. Then, on TV, after two weeks of talking about Flair being injured, he had suddenly healed and was said to be teaming with Anderson in the tag title match. Without saying so, it was clear Windham would be the final Scorpion. The Tuesday before the show, the decision changed. Flair was announced as injured again and Windham was put back in the tag. The decision was also made at that point for Windham & Anderson to win the titles. However, the night of the show, Doom and manager Teddy Long refused to do the job. To make matters worse, the company had backed itself into a corner. The TV show airing the next day, as well as TV's after that, had been taped with announcers talking about Starrcade, including the tag title change. In addition, it was billed as a no DO street fight, and because it was to start the new program, they actually did try to book to make sense, so Anderson & Windham couldn't very well lose the first meeting and then keep challenging. So the end results was a weak double pin, and an embarrassing television show the next day talking about a tag title change that didn't happen.

Herd and the booking team fought about this one as well. For one, Muchnick was coming to the event, built around Sting vs. Scorpion and a tournament called the Pat O'Connor Memorial tag team tournament. The idea was to do an international event, named after one of St. Louis' most popular wrestlers, who had shortly before passed away, and the long-time booker in that city. Before quitting as booker, Ole Anderson wanted to do what wrestling people had traditionally done. Put masks on two locals and call them Mexicans. Shave the heads of a few

job guys and call them Russians. Herd wanted it to be legit. The booking team thought he was nuts, because that was how wrestling worked. It ended up both being legit and not. Of course the promotion would put its own team over, in the Steiner Brothers. Also in the tournament were a group of interesting characters. A made up South African team consisted of Gary Fall, who later gained some fame as the second Doink the Clown in WWF (after Matt Osborne was fired), and Ted Petty, who became a huge star in ECW years later as Flyboy Rocco Rock, and was a Northeast indie star under a mask at the time as Cheetah Kid. From Mexico, they brought in a legit team, Konnan, making his WCW debut, with the original Rey Misterio. Rip Morgan (who was from New Zealand) & Jacko Victory (Jack Victory, who had taken on about two dozen identities in WCW) were the New Zealand team. Masa Saito & Great Muta came from Japan, as the New Japan relationship was back on after the WWF deal fell apart. They went to the finals. Canadians Danny Johnson & Troy Montour, faced real Russians Victor Zangiev & Salman Hashimikov, who at the time were stars in New Japan. Sting beat the Scorpion in a cage match in probably Flair's worst-ever PPV match, since he wasn't allowed to use any of his mannerisms with Dick the Bruiser, in his final St. Louis appearance before his death a few years later, as referee.

The show drew 6,357 paying \$93,425, and with papering and seats blocked off for TV production, the 7,200 almost filled the place. It did about 175,000 buys on PPV, the company's weakest showing of the year.

As interesting a year as 1990 was, it couldn't hold a candle to 1991. Just before the Royal Rumble, Saddam Hussein, a cold war enemy, became a real life enemy with Slaughter linked to him, and turned into perhaps the most controversial period in company history. The casualties, besides good taste, were the loss of NBC and the crowd of 100,000 that never happened. WCW brought Flair back on top to tie the record, but by the summer, when it was time to lose, the Flair-Herd relationship finally snapped. The trial of Dr. George Zahorian took place, which eventually changed everything the WWF had ever been, saw the WWF face media pressure for the first time, and crack badly under it. There was also a major steroid casualty, which may not have been the first, but it was the most well-known since wrestling had changed, and it certainly wasn't the last. Flair set the all-time Tokyo Dome attendance record, which Hogan couldn't touch a week later. A few months later, the biggest dream match from the 80s finally took place when Flair signed with WWF. So did Sid Vicious. It may have been the most newsworthy year of all for WWF, and it was the beginning of the worst down period ever for WCW.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2003

If 1990, was the calm before the storm, then 1991 was the storm before the hurricane. While 1992 was the collapse of the pro wrestling industry, sending it into a funk that it didn't recover from until the Monday Night Wars, all of the seeds of what led to the collapse of 1992 happened in the first seven months of the previous year.

What happened inside the ring paled by comparison in the long run of a series of news stories. The stories were not all related, but their synergistic effect was strong. After the failure of Ultimate Warrior as WWF champion, the decision was made to use Sgt. Slaughter, the former

patriotic babyface, as a transition al champion to go from Warrior to Hogan. On the WCW side, it was back to the feeling that Ric Flair, who opened the year beating Sting for the title, was too old. Since Sting hadn't been a success, and going back to Flair didn't help business any the ideas moved toward Lex Luger.

Ultimately, that led to Flair leaving WCW for the long talked about feud with Hulk Hogan. More than any angle, perhaps in modern wrestling history, Vince McMahon had the ultimate match of the time handed to him on a silver platter without even having to hype it. Due to an impasse with Jim Herd, Flair was fired by WCW without losing the belt in the ring. Titles had not been devalued like they were when Chris Benoit came to WCW nine years later under similar circumstances. People had been clamoring for Hogan vs. Flair on a national basis since 1984, when both became the long-time flag-bearers for their respective warring organizations, and often warring fan bases.

Unfortunately, as history shows, McMahon made a lot of money out of a lot of improbable situations, but he also fumbled a lot of breakaway touchdowns. But in 1991, there was no history of such, and few were considering McMahon botching a Hogan vs. Flair feud as being even a remote possibility.

But at just about the same time Flair was having his problems with WCW, McMahon was having bigger problems, which in the long run were more important. The biggest news story of the year, in hindsight, was the trial of Dr. George T. Zahorian, known within wrestling as the leading steroid dealer to WWF talent, and he was not dealing exclusively with WWF wrestlers either.

But the company faced its biggest media controversy since it went national at the start of the year with the Wrestlemania angle. Slaughter as a heel was doing a gimmick where he had aligned himself with Saddam Hussein, the country's hated nemesis at the time. There was talk of the U.S. going to war against Iraq, and Slaughter had taken on General Adnan (former Oklahoma State wrestling star Adnan Al-Kaisi, who is legitimately from Iraq) as his manager. Somewhere along the lines, they even added the Iron Sheik, from Iran, which was actually an enemy of Iraq at the time, under the new name of Col. Mustafa from Iraq.

The original plan was to hold off the Hogan vs. Warrior rematch to the Los Angeles Coliseum at Wrestlemania, where they would announce 100,000 fans, the largest crowd in the history of wrestling, as long as they came close to filling the building. But with Warrior not setting business on fire, that plan was dropped. Plan B was for Slaughter to win the title from Warrior at the Royal Rumble, and drop it to Hogan at Wrestlemania.

But just before the Rumble, the U.S. declared real life war on Iraq. Suddenly a typical wrestling angle became the ultimate bad taste angle of the time. Whether McMahon expected the war when he started the angle, which in the real world was thought to be a strong possibility when he heated up Slaughter, although not when he first introduced Slaughter the previous summer, or wanted the war (as some of the more calloused and experienced people in the wrestling industry believed at the time), there was little doubt when the opportunity arose, he exploited it for all he could. A lot of long-time wrestlers publicly, and numerous

company employees privately felt they had touched on a bad nerve and should have pulled out, with the idea of focusing on Randy Savage as the top heel and switching plans and going with him as transitional champion. But there didn't appear to even be any serious thought by McMahon of doing so.

Poor taste aside, The Royal Rumble on January 19, 1991, before a sellout of 16,000 fans at the Miami Arena and a whopping 440,000 buys on PPV, was one of the best shows the company had ever put on. In a forgotten classic, The Rockers beat the Orient Express (Pat Tanaka and Paul Diamond, the latter under a mask as Kato) in the show-stealing match. Slaughter beat Warrior in 12:45 to win the title in a ***1/2 match and one of the best of Warrior's career, although it was not due to the performance of either man in the ring as much as two excellent performers working the sidelines. Slaughter waved the Iraqi flag, a country we were at war with, while trying to relive 1981 by bumping all over the place. Things were so tense that General Adnan wore a bullet proof vest to the ring. Sherri Martel and Randy Savage, who were paired up at the time (this was during a period Elizabeth was gone), interfered freely, and basically carried the match while the two guys in the match were tired. Savage, who was doing the "Macho King" gimmick at the time, smashed his scepter over the head of Warrior, and Slaughter pinned him. To make sure there was no riot with the title switch, they immediately sent out Jacques Rougeau and Koko Ware to do a match which was designed just to calm the crowd down. The Royal Rumble came down to Hogan, Brian Knobs of the Nasty Boys, and Earthquake (John Tenta), and with those three left, there was no secret how it was going to end.

Two days later, the 100,000 dream became a pure fantasy. After shooting the title switch angle and expecting a deluge of tickets to be sold, it didn't occur. With between 12,000 and 14,000 tickets sold eight weeks before the show, reality set in and the show was moved indoors to the 16,000-seat Los Angeles Sports Arena. Trying to save face publicly. The company claimed there were no problems selling tickets, but in a war time situation there were security concerns about running a building so large. The implication was that there could be a bomb threat. Somehow no other outdoor sports or entertainment events at that time seemed to have similar concerns.

If ever there was a situation where the saying "there is no such thing as bad publicity" was proven false, it was this early 1991 period during the Gulf War. There were major newspapers calling for letter writing campaigns to sponsors. More than one newspaper claimed that while exploiting the war was not uncommon. Even in television newscasts, nobody had more callously done so than the WWF. Even *Sports Illustrated* did an item mentioning WWF as the biggest exploiter of the war with the angle. Hogan was sent to military bases to soldiers about to leave. When the company came under criticism for that, John Fillipelli, the head of production at the time, wrote a letter claiming that none of the footage would ever air on television. Naturally, it was not only all over television, but clips from Hogan's tour were part of a new open of the show.

But the biggest blow of all was on February 1, when WWF had its annual prime time NBC special, which was advertised as built around Hogan's tour. The company tried to portray Hogan as on the front lines fighting the war stateside, since Slaughter was Saddam Hussein's personal emissary in our country. The show drew a 6.7 rating and 12 share. It was one of the lowest rated shows of the entire week on network television, as well as the lowest rating the WWF had ever drawn on NBC. Keep in mind, almost all the other shows were in the far worse Saturday Night Live late night time slot, and the pre-Wrestlemania prime time NBC special had previously never drawn below an 11.6 rating. The angle didn't seem to lead to a major decrease in arena business, and there didn't appear to be any major repercussions other than Mania going indoors (and in truth, even without the war exploitation, there was nosing they were going to be able to sell more than 25,000 or 30,000 tickets, and it would have been a disaster for Mania in such a large stadium). But the rating led NBC to think WWF was passé. The company only got one more show before being canceled. There were a lot of reasons business plummeted in 1992. Losing NBC exposure as well as the prestige that went with being a network property was a significant one of them.

The company got another public relations blow two weeks later when there was major national coverage of an SMG sports survey, which was commissioned by the leading advertising agencies in the country. While this survey was actually done well before the controversy, the results were that out of 114 sports listed, "WWF Big Time Wrestling" was judged the single most disliked sport in the United States. Some 40% of adults surveyed said they either hated or greatly disliked it. That got a lot of headlines, although the same survey found it to be No. 40 in the most popular category, but even then, it was barely ahead of Roller Derby, listed at No. 58, a sport which had gone out of existence for the most part a decade earlier. But this new in the face of all previous thoughts as to the Vince McMahon influence on wrestling and making it popular with the mainstream. A similar survey done in 1983, the year before the media had discovered wrestling as cool entertainment due to Cyndi Lauper and Hulk Hogan, and before Vince McMahon's product was outside of the Northeast and the territorial system ruled, pro wrestling was listed as No. 8 among the most popular sports in the country. Worse, the survey specifically told mainstream advertisers to steer clear of WWF. Nye Lavelle, who designed the survey, said, "It was a marketer doing a mainstream product, I'd say away from it. There are so many people that hate it, and it's just something because of that, that you wouldn't want to align yourself with."

The company had its fur up when it came to the Los Angeles Sports Arena on March 24, 1991, for Wrestlemania. The show drew just over 15,000 fans paying \$722,035. To show how insecure the company was, early in the show, Gorilla Monsoon stated they had just gotten figures in, and that more people had ordered this show than any PPV event in history. Of course, with PPV being a last minute buy, even preliminary results would not have been available until early the next week, and there was no indication Wrestlemania that year had the level of interest as in most previous years. It was scripted to try and defend somehow to its audience that the company had not made a major miscalculation with the controversial angle. The kings of

PPV then, as now, were the big boxing matches. No pro wrestling event could touch the numbers of what Mike Tyson could do in that era. A week after the show, WWF officially privately claimed 520,000 buys, which would have beat out the Hogan vs. Warrior match the previous year, and been a success. Most cable sources had the figure at closer to 400,000, slightly below the Royal Rumble, and considered another negative.

Hogan won the title in 20:24, one of his longest matches, and it being Wrestlemania, he and Slaughter had their working shoes on. Still, it was one of those Manias largely forgotten. The show stealer took place earlier in what was billed as a loser had to retire from wrestling match with Warrior and Savage, stemming from Savage costing him the title. Savage pulled out one of those miracle performances he did in that era, going 20:43 and carrying Warrior to a ****1/4 match, one of the two the best matches Warrior was ever in (the other, also against Savage, took place a year later). Savage hadn't wrestled in a while due to thumb surgery and was nowhere close to being ready to return. But if he'd have been in the ring with any other breathing wrestler, it probably would have won match of the year. After Savage was pinned, a furious Sherri Martel attacked him. Elizabeth had been gone for some time, but was shown at ringside during the match. Savage also entered with a white cowboy hat, telegraphing he was going face by the end of the show. As Sherri was beating on a helpless and beaten Savage after one of those career performances, Elizabeth hit the ring and made the save, throwing Martel out of the ring. Many fans were literally crying as Savage and Elizabeth had their reconciliation. At the time, Savage was planning on taking a hiatus from wrestling to start a family. Savage had gone, with his great performance during the match and reconciliation, from No. 2 heel to No. 2 babyface in 20 minutes. To keep him fresh while selling the stipulation, he was moved into the color commentary role, working with McMahon and Roddy Piper. The wheels were already in motion for the made-for-TV wedding later in the year.

But severe damage had been done over the first quarter of the year to the company's reputation. For years, WWF wrestling was dismissed as harmless fun for children, but the blatant exploitation of the war made it seem like a sleazy company that would go to any lengths for a buck. Those who had followed the business for years realized that a facade had been unmasked, and things would never be the same again. But nobody realized just how much that would mean over the next year.

In July, Zahorian was under trial in Harrisburg, PA, for illegally dispensing both steroids and downers to wrestlers. The company got what appeared at the time to be the break of a lifetime when Judge William Caldwell listened to the arguments by Hogan's attorney, Jerry McDevitt (whose success led to him soon becoming McMahon's personal attorney, where he made a reputation that led to him being involved in defending high profile non-wrestling figures as well), just days before the trial was about to start. He then quashed the subpoena for Hogan to testify, where he would have had to admit that Zahorian regularly sold him steroids both live and in Federal Express packages, sent to him under at least three different names. Caldwell stated that it would interfere with Hogan's personal and professional life if he had to testify, and in doing so, dropped one of the 17 counts against Zahorian, which was for selling steroids to pro wrestler John H. Doe (Terry Bollea).

The story of Hogan testifying in the trial had been given front page coverage by *USA Today* and was a lead story on the ABC Network News and in the *New York Times*. All three network newscasts had the trial on their radar on the idea that the kiddie icon, Mr. "Say your prayers and take your vitamins," would be under oath, in a court of law, having to admit that he received steroids from a drug dealer. There was little question that had the company, and Hogan himself, not so blatantly exploited the war, that people who would have looked the other way were very interested in Hogan being brandished as a fraud. But when Hogan didn't have to testify, even though the merits of the case remained unchanged, interest in the trial went from all three network newscasts showing interest, to very little coverage outside of the Harrisburg, PA region.

But even though several other big names ended up having to testify, including Roddy Piper, the company's No. 2 star in its rise, it was clear to the mainstream there was a huge gap between Hogan and Piper, even though Piper had starred in a movie called "They Live." Zahorian was convicted of the remaining 16 counts and spent years in prison before being let out in 1994 on good behavior. In addition, his \$3.7 million office and condominium was seized because the jury believed he had used the facility for making drug deals. It was the government's test case of the law enacted in 1988 where doctor distributing steroids to athletes for any reason other than the treatment of disease would be committing a felony. Zahorian later resurfaced as a key government witness in a failed attempt to imprison McMahon as part of a conspiracy with Zahorian to get wrestlers on steroids in a landmark 1994 case. But if not for a few things, the negative effects of the trial on the WWF probably would have been minimal.

But even though Hogan did not appear at the trial, he hardly came out untouched. When Zahorian took the stand, he admitted selling steroids to Hogan, the name the WWF most wanted kept out of the court record. He described Hogan as already having a serious steroid problem in 1984, when the two met. Hogan's name came up because Zahorian tried to claim he was the one responsible for Hogan getting off steroids, claiming Hogan had not used a steroid since 1988 or 1989 (in the McMahon trial, Hogan admitted that he used steroids after those dates, but also noted that after 1989, he had gotten into one of the biggest fights ever with his wife when she found out he was still using after he had promised he had stopped). Zahorian claimed he began selling steroids to wrestlers in 1979, and at the live house shows would give them to between 15 and 20 wrestlers on average (WWF house shows at the time averaged booking 16 to 22 wrestlers). Zahorian also testified selling steroids to both McMahon and retired wrestler Freddie Blassie, and claimed he only dispensed them in minimal dosages, and that no wrestler he treated ever suffered medical problems. Later in the trial, that was contradicted when it came out that Rick Martel had suffered liver damage. Prosecutor Theodore Smith estimated that Zahorian had made several hundred thousand dollars in sales of illegal drugs to wrestlers over the 18-month period covered in the indictment.

While most in wrestling were on pins and needles, one rival promoter was certainly not. "It's a miracle this hasn't come out before," said Jerry Lawler in *Sports Illustrated*. "They (are) obviously a requirement of those (WWF) guys." Graham, the man who had sold out Madison Square Garden so often for McMahon's father, was crippled by this point

from avascular necrosis, a disease that degenerates the joints, resulting in him having an artificial hip and an artificial ankle, which his doctor told him was due to his 24 years of steroid usage, and already was suffering liver damage (Graham would have almost surely passed away had it not been for him getting a liver transplant). Graham was called by Smith, who probably later wished he'd never been involved with Graham, to dispute Zahorian's claim that none of his so-called patients had ever suffered health problems. Graham also disputed Zahorian's claim that he only sold steroids to wrestlers in small doses, noting he himself was a heavy user, and in one 1988 purchase, Zahorian sold him enough steroids to last him a full year.

On the last day of the trial, when it was clear his client was going down, colorful defense attorney William Costopoulos, made a last ditch plea to the jury saying, "All he (Zahorian) got was \$35 per night to be a ringside physician. He didn't give anyone heroin or crack. He believed the drugs weren't harmful. He didn't know the law had been changed. He admits he sold steroids to Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon, but he didn't think he was doing anything wrong."

Apparently trying to act like his client was taking the fall for bigger celebrities, that last sentence changed the course of history, as almost no media knew Zahorian had already implicated Hogan during the trial, but the last day statement mentioning the two richest men in wrestling as having been dealt steroids by a now convicted dealer became a major news story in New York. More importantly, Costopoulos showed a photo that became famous, run on TV shows and in newspapers around the country, with Zahorian being flanked by McMahon and Hogan. It should be noted that, even though the two butted heads frequently, McMahon and Hogan were not just star maker and star, but were good friends and frequent bodybuilding training partners. As the second trial revealed, Zahorian would send his steroids right to McMahon's office for Hogan to pick up. Hogan was the person who convinced McMahon to use steroids in the first place when the two, along with Tom "Zeus" Lister, were training in Atlanta while filming "No Holds Barred" in 1988. McMahon had, according to testimony in his trial from his secretary, Emily Feinberg, who hid his steroids at her house while he was using them, never used the stuff until he was nearly 43 years old.

At the time, McMahon was a WWF TV announcer and many fans weren't even aware he was the company owner. He was not the high profile character he is today, and in fact, until 1997, believe it or not, chose to keep a low profile, making stars out of the wrestlers and just directing traffic rather than being the traffic itself. Saying McMahon purchased steroids from Zahorian probably wouldn't have meant much on the surface either, but it turned out to have major repercussions as the media dug. The point was, McMahon couldn't claim he didn't know what was going on with the drug doctor in his company, being he was one of the guys in line to get the goodies.

But the press jumped on the mention of Hogan. At the time, Hogan not only appeared in "Say no to drugs" print ads, as did all the company's top wrestlers, like Jake Roberts, Jim Neidhart, Savage, Ultimate Warrior and others. Hogan was also the pitchman for "Hulk Hogan vitamins," being sold to kids. While in wrestling long before the trial, the joke on Hogan vitamins were whether they were "orals or injectable (code words for the two different forms of steroids), suddenly

the rest of the world was picking up on the hypocrisy and the joke went from locker rooms to major newspapers and even television newscasts. Hogan Vitamins were the first casualty, with the sales plummeting as soon as his name was mentioned in the trial, and within a few months, the company dispensing the product went out of business.

It was panic at Titan Sports the day after the trial, where Zahorian was convicted. Nobody's phone calls were returned, including such heavy media hitters at Ted Koppel and Peter Jennings, although Vice President of marketing and promotions, Basil DeVito Jr., did talk with us, saying curtly, "I'm not going to acknowledge that anything about that trial has anything to do with us."

The only other thing the company would say was a press release from DeVito Jr., which read, "The WWF feels victimized by the tactics and statements of defense attorney William C. Costopoulos in utilizing the media in a 'bait and switch' defense. Dr. George T. Zahorian III, the former Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission appointed doctor, is on trial; not the WWF, or any WWF wrestlers. Neither the WWF, nor any of its wrestlers or associates has been charged with any illegality. We stand by our philosophy of wholesome family entertainment and the positive example we set for the youth of America. To insure the safety and well-being of our performers, fans and employees, in June 1987, the WWF adopted a drug policy prohibiting the use of controlled substances in connection with any of its professional wrestlers."

It was only days later when DeVito was apologizing for the misleading press release, since the only drug the company had ever tested for at that point was cocaine. DeVito's defense was that in 1987, when the cocaine testing was enacted after the Jim Duggan/Iron Sheik debacle, steroids were not yet a controlled substance. Costopoulos responded by telling the *New York Times* that steroid use wasn't limited to the wrestlers who testified in the case that they used them (Piper, Rick Martel, Brian Blair and Dan Spivey), saying "they are used throughout the WWF. They either use them or they don't participate." Amidst the furor, Hogan was pulled from all his house shows for a few weeks, with the company fearing he would get a negative reaction.

Without question, the most vigilant reporter was Phil Mushnick of the *New York Post*. Mushnick had little interest in wrestling after having been a fan of it as a kid. At the time, Mushnick carried considerable weight. Newspapers were far more important than they are today, and the biggest heavyweights in mainstream sports journalism read Mushnick as someone considered gutsy enough to say what many quietly thought, but didn't want to say for fear of ruffling feathers of those they had to cover daily. Mushnick wound up in contact at the time with Bruno Sammartino, the childhood wrestling hero to most adults in the New York area, who talked about how wrestling had changed, due to the proliferation of steroids and drugs like cocaine, between 1981, when he left, and 1985, when he came back. In fact, when Sammartino was talked out of retirement as a wrestler by McMahon, he refused to travel with most of the wrestlers because of how wild it had become, and usually traveled with agent Jay Strongbow.

"I don't test for steroids," said Jim Herd about his reaction to the events. "I don't test for alcohol. Some may take

umbrage, but we're dealing with professional, intelligent adults. We test for hard drugs."

Outside of Harrisburg, the city where the trial was most heavily covered was Portland, OR, because he lived in nearby Hillsborough. Piper said that he took steroids to feed his family and because they enhanced his ability. He said that doctors who claimed steroids don't enhance your ability were lying, and then, since Piper was one of the last active wrestlers to be able to admit publicly that wrestling wasn't a shoot, claimed he needed steroids because he was almost always fighting bigger guys.

Steroids had been around wrestling since at least the 1960s, long before Graham was in wrestling. Graham became a huge draw in the AWA in 1972. But he was hardly the pioneer or innovator of this as some revisionist history will likely paint him. There is also no doubt his success as the top drawing heel in the business by the late 70s influenced others. Most notable was Hogan, who patterned his entire act around what Graham was doing in Florida when Terry Bollea was the tall, skinny kid that a lot of the wrestlers knew, sitting in the second row at the Armory in Tampa and standing out in the crowd. Bollea went to Robinson High School with many of the Florida wrestling stars (including Mike Graham, Dick Slater and Steve Keim), who were great high school athletes, while Bollea was a tall musician and anything but an athlete in high school. By the mid-70s, when McMahon's father brought Graham to New York, and later decided to make him the most enduring heel champion since the initials WWWF were created, his physique, rap, color and charisma made him the favorite of the young McMahon, who saw the idea of taking a whole troupe of Billy Graham's and making wrestling bigger than it had ever been before. But it was six years after Graham's title reign that steroid use suddenly exploded in wrestling. That coincided with McMahon taking the WWF national, Hogan becoming the game's biggest star, and both a promoter and a public buying the idea that these huge muscular guys were tougher and better athletes than the great workers and real top-shelf athletes who dominated the profession in the previous generation.

Sammartino, at 5-9, and 265 pounds, with huge forearms and chest, was considered among the strongest men in the world in the 60s. Although many in the profession were using them as his career progressed, he himself had never touched steroids. He hated them, perhaps because of both legitimate concerns for health and also because he saw it as people cheating to achieve a level of power, like a 565 pound bench press, that he'd achieved by old fashioned means. But, while there was certainly open knowledge of usage in 1981, it was still only a relatively small percentage of wrestlers using them. When Sammartino returned to the WWF in 1985 to work as an announcer side-by-side with McMahon (and later Jesse Ventura), and eventually for an in-ring comeback, nearly everyone was on them.

Mushnick was furious at the contradiction. A morality play aimed at getting children to buy merchandise was presided over and filled with guys doing illegal drugs to keep their positions. Not that the NFL was all that much different, but it wasn't as if Mushnick hadn't written the same things about track and football either. It should also be noted that at the time, and this has been forgotten in time, Mushnick was good friends with DeVito, McMahon's second in command.

It was how both McMahon and Hogan handled the negative publicity that not only changed the face of wrestling, but created the mainstream media reputation both have never truly lived down. It also led to a domino effect that knocked the business for a major loop.

That same week, NFL superstar Lyle Alzado went public with his cancer, which killed him a few years later. His doctor blamed it on his years of steroid and Growth Hormone usage as an NFL star, as Alzado started using them in college, kept up throughout his career, and continued to use them after he retired. Many disputed the story that the steroids had anything to do with Alzado's health issues, noting that no doctor had found a link between steroids and brain cancer, but a cover story in *Sports Illustrated* came coincidentally in the same issue as the magazine's very brief coverage of the Zahorian trial.

The *New York Times*, which was still the most powerful media voice in the country, because everyone followed what they wrote, had a column saying, "Is Pro Wrestling Down for the Count," complete with the famous photo of McMahon, Zahorian and Hogan. The actual pro wrestling resurgence story in 1984-85 was actually more of a tremendous PR campaign by McMahon to call attention to a business that had been gaining in success in many parts of the country for years. The fear was, especially if Hogan had testified, this likely would have done the same thing, in reverse.

Without Hogan's name, the Zahorian trial was dismissed by most of the media as being unimportant because it involved wrestling, a business sportswriters usually wanted nothing to do with because they considered it fake. When his name came out in the closing arguments, there was some coverage, but it would have shortly faded away. Suddenly, and this was largely due to the Alzado timing and Mushnick columns spurring on the *Times*, newspapers around the country were hammering the idea that WWF was marketing superheroes on steroids to teenagers at the same time steroid usage was increasing in high schools. Suddenly, the wrestling steroid story was legitimate, because it corresponded with another aspect of a real story, the football steroid story and the alarming increase in usage at the high school level. Robert Lipsyte in the *New York Times* wrote a story tying them together, "The Cancer in Football and Pro Wrestling," and noted that while some don't consider the wrestling story worth covering, that Hogan was far more of an American hero to the public than the more media publicized Alzado.

In the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, in a market where reporters, due to the power of Sam Muchnick, had traditionally laid off any criticism and snide remarks on wrestling, there was major coverage on the heels of WWF attempting to run the biggest event ever in the storied history of the city. WWF was promoting Hulk Hogan vs. Sgt. Slaughter for the title with Savage as referee, a dream match held nowhere else, plus Undertaker vs. Ultimate Warrior in a coffin match, outdoors at Busch Stadium. The day before the show, Bernie Mikalsz wrote, "I was going to attend the big wrestling extravaganza to be held Sunday night at Busch Stadium and then write a cute column about it. Forget about it. There's nothing funny about a cynical organization that blatantly markets steroid-enhanced false idols to impressionable children." The day of the big show, the paper had a huge story by Jeff Gordon, whose lead set the tone. "By stressing muscle size and definition over old-

fashioned grappling skill, the major promoter of professional wrestling may have encouraged rampant abuse of anabolic steroids and human growth hormones." The strong quote of all came from Sammartino in the story, when talking about Hogan: "Here is a guy who is, to me, the phoniest guy in the history of the sport. Here is a guy who talks about saying your prayers- I doubt if he's ever even see the inside of a church- and eating your vitamins. We all know what kind of vitamins he's been on."

The stadium show drew 14,500 paid, less than what would have filled the indoor arena, and the company lost \$40,000 on what was pushed as the biggest show in the history of the city.

The WWF commissioned DeVito, as Muchnick's friend, to try to quell the media furor. But he only fueled the fire and made it worse, with a second press release that stated: "As a responsible leader in family sports/entertainment, the World Wrestling Federation has had the most comprehensive and enforced drug program in all of professional sports. Now, the WWF program will be expanded to include the most comprehensive steroid policy as well... This innovative policy will insure that our athletes adhere to the highest standards in order to preserve their place as worthy role models throughout the world."

Three days later, when questioned about how the claim of the most comprehensive and enforced drug program in all of sports (which included testing for cocaine, but no other drugs at the time), DeVito took the blame for writing a bad press release, saying it was his unfortunate choice of bad wording. It got so bad, that later that night, on Prime Time Wrestling (a two-hour Monday night show on the USA Network that later morphed into Raw), McMahon himself still said, when addressing the issues without mentioning them, "it must come as no surprise to you that the WWF has one of the most comprehensive drug testing, education and rehabilitation programs in all of sports... That's why, when you see this symbol (pointing to a WWF logo), you can be assured of drug-free sports entertainment that you and your entire family can be proud of."

It wasn't just the media that was a concern. Hogan was pulled from house shows in late June. Those shows ended up drawing 3,000 to 3,500 fans, with no walk-up at all, terrible numbers for Hogan, although the WWF did get tons of publicity out in the cities that Hogan wasn't going to be there, protecting the markets long-term while sacrificing walk-up sales. Hogan returned after the trial ended, drawing 6,500 in Chicago, 5,000 in Detroit and 4,100 in Providence. The Chicago crowd was the smallest he had drawn in that city, always one of his best, in years. Now, to those who attended, the reaction to Hogan hadn't changed one iota, but the small crowds (in part due to Slaughter being dead as a challenger by that point) were a concern. However, advances for all the upcoming Hogan house show appearances went flat. Ironically, for the first time, Hogan became the No. 2 draw in the company, as advances for Ultimate Warrior vs. Undertaker matches were outdistancing those of Hogan. But Hogan was the champ and the goose that laid the golden eggs, so McMahon realized this had to be addressed, which turned out to be the worst blow of them all.

With more and more pressure on the company from the media, and the company's attempts at defense only working

in reverse, McMahon went from the idea of misleading to the idea of telling the truth.

On July 16, 1991, McMahon scheduled an afternoon press conference where he would admit his steroid use. Later that night, Hulk Hogan would go on the Arsenio Hall show and do the same. The idea was to admit use in the past, when it was legal, as steroid usage had become a felony by this point. Due to a legal loophole, from 1988 to 1991, it was illegal for Zahorian to distribute steroids to wrestlers, but not illegal for wrestlers to get the packages and use the steroids. But by this time it was. Later in the year, numerous big name wrestlers, like Savage, would go on shows and when the inevitable question was asked, would say, I used them when they were legal and when we didn't know the risks. Of course, in almost all cases, it was a different form of b.s., but it was a lot smarter in hindsight than what Hogan did.

McMahon stated that he briefly used decadurabolin, which he purchased from Zahorian, in 1987 (a different date that testimony in his trial, as well as the dates of the packages sent to him by Zahorian indicated), but quickly gave it up because he didn't feel "natural" on the juice. Years later when on trial, that brief period turned out to be several years, and didn't end by choice, but because McMahon contracted hepatitis and his doctor told him he had to give the stuff up.

McMahon told Hogan to also tell the truth. At least that's what Hogan admitted three years later while under oath and being cross-examined by Laura Brevetti. Hogan admitted he decided to call an audible. In his infamous Arsenio Hall appearance, he claimed he had only used steroids three times in his life, and only to rehabilitate injuries. He claimed he suffered a torn biceps in 1983 while holding the WWF title. He didn't want to take the necessary time off, which he claimed would be a full year, so he used steroids to speed up the healing and keep going. There was no record of Hogan even taking any time off in 1984, nor of arm shrinkage that would occur with a torn biceps. While astute followers recognized his time line was off, as he didn't win the title until 1984, the whole speech was b.s. Worse, he infuriated Zahorian, who thought the two were good friends, by saying that he didn't even know Zahorian, and that the photo in question was basically some fan at a show asking for a photo. He also infuriated two others, former champs Graham and Sammartino. What is forgotten in this story is that after the Zahorian trial, since Graham was linked with Hogan and Hogan got out of the trial, Graham was constantly asked if Hogan had used steroids. His pat answer was that Hogan was a hell of a man and expected he would tell the truth when he chose to. Hogan didn't take that well, as on Hall, he spoke disparagingly about Graham, calling him a steroid and drug abuser. He said that Sammartino was a hypocrite for speaking out against steroids while he made big money wrestling known steroid user Graham. For Hogan to say that, which in a sense was surprising since Graham had treated him with kid gloves (although at the time, Graham was considered an "enemy of the state" because he openly had talked about steroid use being at dangerous levels in wrestling) wasn't smart thinking on his part, because Graham had several crazy friends in wrestling. While Graham had never been critical of Hogan up to that point, the comments led to Graham lashing back at him with a vengeance. Sammartino on the other hand had never been shy in his personal disdain for Hogan, which dated back a number of years. He didn't

like the man personally, didn't like what he represented, and also grew tired of hearing people talk to him about how wrestling had gotten so popular and Hogan was such a big drawing card, when in his mind, his numbers and popularity in his heyday were greater. Sammartino's his figures in the 70s on a consistency basis in his home territory did blow away Hogan's in same arenas in the 80s, but he got nowhere near the same coverage or publicity for them. Hogan was likely looking for a venue to blow off steam regarding Sammartino, but being critical of him because he had wrestled people on steroids as champion was a ludicrous comment from someone who had rarely wrestled anyone not on steroids as champion.

Sammartino had tremendous respect among the old-timers, and suddenly Hogan had created a slew full of enemies in his own business. Infuriating all of those men wasn't a good idea, especially when he told an outrageous lie that everyone in the profession knew about. Hogan claimed his size was natural. This made friends laugh, because Hogan in one year, after he was in his early 20s and discovered steroids, went from 230 to 320. WWF publicly, since Hogan was its biggest star, had Steve Planamanta tell the media that in fact, Hogan had never used steroids except to rehabilitate injuries. I can recall a conversation with Planamanta when it was clear to everyone but the WWF that this story was going to explode in a bad way for the company, that Hogan really needed to come forward and be honest or it was going to have a very negative effect on things. Planamanta, issuing what was the company thought process, responded, "Who do you think people are going to believe, Hogan or Billy Graham?"

Jim Ross, then the lead announcer at WCW, was fair in talking about the story publicly on the WCW hotline, saying there is a problem and it is not exclusive to WWF, but added, "As for those guys who have gone on national television this week and said they only used steroids three times in their life for medicinal purposes, they're lying and they're risking damaging their career beyond repair." Three years later, while under oath, when asked if he had lied to the media and lied on television in his statements after the Zahorian trial regarding his use of steroids, Hogan admitted he had.

Everyone in wrestling knew he was full of it. The business was split into different camps. Those in WWF knew to shut up publicly, but many knew problems were on the horizon. But the prevailing view was that it would all blow over. Some defended Hogan, although they were the minority, saying that he had no choice but to lie. McMahon told me he was devastated when Hogan didn't tell the truth on Arsenio Hall, although later claimed he never said that. It wasn't hard to find wrestler after wrestler who would say Hogan was full of bunk. But at the matches, while there were negative signs and some boozing, at least those who paid for tickets for the most part didn't seem to care. But the pressure was getting to him. Plus, there was going to be a moment of truth. The WWF was really going to at some point have to start testing, and all the monsters were going to shrink, and it would completely change the dynamic of the company. While McMahon insisted it was the storylines, and not the bodies, that were responsible for the company's success, and that he'd make both pro wrestling and pro bodybuilding even more popular than either had ever been, and would do it with steroid-free athletes, the public had seen the freak show. You couldn't put the genie back in the bottle. The next year, with mostly clean wrestlers, the

popularity nosedived, while the chemically enhanced "American Gladiators" show saw a rise in ratings commensurate with the decline in WWF ratings.

Sammartino and Graham (and as the year went on, numerous others) publicly claimed 90% of the wrestlers in the company were on steroids. Privately, John Studd, who publicly claimed Graham and Sammartino were lying to the media, in his mind protecting the business, was telling Graham at the time that his estimate of 90% was too low. Jesse Ventura clarified his feeling on the percentage by saying 90% of the big money players were using them. Vince McMahon admitted there was usage, but said these figures were ridiculously high. Years later, when under oath, Hogan pegged the figure at 75 to 80%, and possibly more, while Warrior estimated 90%. But the company's credibility, weak enough because it was a wrestling company, reached new depths, and opened McMahon up to attacks from every direction. Some were fair, many were totally unfair, and some completely unfounded. But with his credibility nil, nearly everyone with a story was taken seriously, and given more credibility than McMahon, DeVito and Planamanta. That turned out to be an even bigger problem the next year, which was part of the reason for the black period for the wrestling industry.

WCW was struggling, which could have probably been written about almost every year but a few in company history. Dusty Rhodes was brought back as booker, and on the night of one of the worst blizzards in years, Ric Flair beat Sting at the Meadowlands to win the NWA title on January 11, 1991. The title change at a house show was not the planned scenario.

The originally booked idea was for Flair, as the Black Scorpion, at Starrcade 1990 in St. Louis, to win the title, and tie the listed record of Harley Race as a seven-time champion (technically, both Flair and Race should have been listed as eight time champions by that point) in the city where NWA history was the strongest and in front of Sam Muchnick. Sting refused to lose the title to the Black Scorpion, feeling after the angle had basically ruined his tenure as champion, he at least wanted the blow-off win. Since the decision had been made to go to Flair as champion, the idea was to put the mask on Barry Windham for Sting to beat at first. But when Sting agreed to put Flair over at the Meadowlands, Flair agreed to lose cleanly to Sting at Starrcade under the mask. Sting wasn't really into the match, so it was not at the level of most Flair-Sting encounters. The crowd sensed it and began turning on Sting as the bout went on. The finish was right out of the Flair heel early 80s play book, with Sting getting near fall after near fall on him until the collision spot, with Flair landing on Sting, and Sting getting his leg on the ropes. Flair took the leg off the ropes before the ref saw it, and at 20:38, history was made. Unlike in May, when that was cause for celebration and the plans for a few weeks earlier, new politics rendered history unimportant. WCW was getting tired of using the NWA name, and had started billing Sting as WCW champion instead. When Flair won what fans believed to be the record-tying reign, the record was never publicly referred to. The blizzard kept the paid attendance down to 5,000 paying \$78,000, and that was with a promotion involving Paul Heyman and Lawrence Taylor that got a lot of local media publicity. Because of the weather, there were only about 4,000 in the huge arena for the history that wasn't acknowledged.

The title switch to Flair didn't help business. A Flair-Sting rematch nine days later in Chicago drew just 1,300 fans. Flair's only new program set up as champion was with probably the tallest wrestler ever, 7-6", and 405 pound Jorge "El Gigante" Gonzalez. Gonzalez, 25, was an Atlanta Hawks draft pick after being an Olympic basketball star on the Argentinean team. He was too slow for the NBA, so was signed to a huge money pro wrestling contract with the idea of creating a Hispanic Andre the Giant. But while he was nearly nine inches taller than Andre, he didn't have the scary physical presence, and couldn't comprehend what pro wrestling was. Flair was the only one who was able to solve the mystery of how to do a match with him, largely bouncing off him as he stood in the center of the ring. It was the same formula he'd used for other immobile objects, most notably with Rhodes. But that didn't draw either.

The company's first PPV event of the year was one of the best PPV events up to that point in history, and the last time for many years anyone would say anything close to that about a WCW show. Wrestle War '91 on February 24, 1991, headlined by War Games. Of course, it wasn't that simple. Coincidence would have it that WWF ran a house show the night before at Arizona State University in Tempe. It was the same game WWF had played many times before. They ran a house show that didn't end until 11:20 p.m., and after a traffic jam leaving the building, by the time most fans got home, the last thing they wanted to do was go to a wrestling show the next early afternoon. WWF drew 6,000 fans, which was 4,800 paying \$60,000 for a show headlined by Warrior over Slaughter in a long cage match designed more to get people to hate wanting to see another wrestling show than entertain. The next afternoon, WCW, which spent far more on local advertising, drew 6,800 fans, which was 4,300 paying \$53,000, and garnered 155,000 buys on PPV.

Both sides were claiming victory. WWF officials said it was a success because they ran a regular house show in a smaller building and drew a larger gate. WCW claimed it was a victory because they put on a PPV that Wrestlemania wouldn't be able to touch, garnering 94% thumbs up, at the time the third best poll result in our history, trailing only the 1989 Music City Showdown in Nashville and the 1989 New York Knockouts Clash show, both headlined by legendary Flair matches with Ricky Steamboat and Terry Funk. The War Games was a **** match, with the heel team of Flair & Larry Zbyszko & Sid Vicious & Barry Windham beating Sting & Brian Pillman & The Steiners in 22:05. The finish was supposed to be Vicious laying out Pillman with a series of power bombs, which was to result in the match being stopped.

Ironically, the finish was too real. When Vicious delivered the first power bomb, Pillman's feet hit the top of the cage, ruining his trajectory in his drop. He ended up legitimately knocked out, and going to the hospital with muscle and ligament strains in his neck. He also came out of the match as a star, but it wasn't followed upon. The show had an international flavor, with a battle of Japan's top foreigners, Stan Hansen vs. Big Yan Vader going to a double count out, a match from the JWP promotion in Japan with Itsuki Yamazaki & Marni Kitamura over Miss A (Dynamite Kansai) & Miki Handa, and an opener with Juarez-based Luchadores Eddy Guerrero & Ultraman over Huichol & Rudy Boy Gonzalez. There wasn't a bad match on the show, which featured very strong performances by Terry

Taylor vs. Tom Zenk and Lex Luger vs. Danny Spivey, the latter of which was something of a miracle.

Nevertheless, there was an attendance record set during this reign. Jim Herd and Seiji Sakaguchi of New Japan put together a deal for New Japan's third ever event at the Tokyo Dome on March 21, 1991. The Japanese loved something authentically American, so they used the term "Starcade '91 at Tokyo Dome," which in those days meant almost as much as the idea of calling a show Wrestlemania. The combined WCW/New Japan show drew an announced 64,500 (if you take away 1,000 you've probably got a more accurate number, but the building was sold out) and \$3,160,000, both of which were all-time records in Japan. The show aired on tape delay in the U.S. and did 100,000 buys on PPV, which to this day is still an all-time record for any PPV event coming from Japan. The main event was Flair, as NWA and WCW champion, facing IWGP champion Tatsumi Fujinami. Fujinami scored the pin in 23:20 of a good match, but before the finish, they did the classic Dusty finish, where Fujinami threw Flair over the top rope. Those who were alert saw the finish coming a mile away, as when the match started, Bill Alfonso was announced as referee, with Massao "Tiger" Hattori as sub referee. I can remember that moment vividly, sitting in the press box in Japan and the English speaking Japanese reporters, knowing that in Japan in that era it was all clean finishes, all recognized what was going on. One said to me, "I can't believe it. They're going to break our hearts tonight." While Rhodes and WCW took a lot of heat for what happened, New Japan did agree to it. Flair, who had juiced, and wrestled more aggressively than he usually did in the U.S., wiped out ref Bill Alfonso with a tackle when Fujinami moved. Fujinami pinned Flair with the fans counting to three, but no ref. Hattori jumped in the ring. Flair charged at Fujinami and was flipped over the top rope. When Flair got back in, Fujinami put him in an abdominal stretch, and took him to the mat in a lateral guillotine, and Hattori counted three. The crowd went nuts, and celeb rated for a long time after the show ended. While reporters in Japan were given free reign backstage, when WCW taped the vignette for PPV where they took the belt from Fujinami, the door was locked. Nobody acknowledged to anyone in Japan the night of the show that anything had happened differently than the first NWA title change in Japan in more than a decade, and first ever in a new Japan ring. The newspapers all reported the next day that Fujinami had joined Baba as the only Japanese wrestler ever to win the most historical of all wrestling titles.

A few days later, it was reported in the Japanese newspaper s that the Americans screwed Fujinami out of the famed big gold belt and were trying to rule that Flair won the match via DQ and took the belt home with him. The historical story is that this was the first time the NWA and WCW belts were revealed as being two different championships. Fujinami was billed as NWA champion in Japan, although he never actually defended the title there. Flair was billed as WCW champion in the U.S. The Japanese knew Flair was defending a title in the U.S. The Americans were never told anything about Fujinami. The show also featured the 1991 match of the year, with Rick & Scott Steiner over Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki. Because matches with suplexes all over the place were novel in the U.S. it blew people away who saw it. Years later, when those moves were done with regularity, in hindsight, the match hardly aged as well as the Bret Hart vs. Curt Hennig WWF SummerSlam match later in the year.

The Tokyo Dome was also the site of the latest chapter in a heated wrestling war, which got even sillier nine days later. The Super World Sports promotion, which had a working agreement with the WWF, ran a competing show at the Tokyo Dome on March 30. Ticket sales for Starrcade were lapping those of the WWF show, which was billed as a double headliner with Slaughter defending against Warrior and Hogan & Genichiro Tenryu against the Road Warriors (known as the LOO in WWF at the time, but billed in Japan under their far better known name). Of course , this took place a week after Mania , and Hogan regained the title, but the Warriors won via count out in the main event in what was the first ever meeting with the 80s biggest singles star against the 80s top drawing tag team. The extent that WCW could never beat WWF reached ultimate proportion s when the attendance at the event was as announced as a new all-time building and Japanese wrestling record, 64,618. There were actually about 20,000 empty seats, so a real figure was probably about 35,000. Fans chanted "fake number," but as was customary in Japan about not contradicting authority, Hogan had broken Flair 's attendance record after just nine days.

In those days, the one part of wrestling rarely talked about were TV ratings. WWF was killing WCW. Its PPV shows were much bigger numbers. Its house shows were in the main arena in most markets and with a few exceptions in the Southeast, outdrew WCW everywhere. But when it came to cable TV ratings, WCW was almost always ahead. However, ratings for WCW dropped 21% on Saturday and 10% on Sunday. For the first several months of 1991, it was a dead heat. Prime Time Wrestling on Monday night, the predecessor to Raw, averaged a 2.8, the same as WCW Main Event on Sunday afternoon. All-American Wrestling on Saturday morning averaged a 2.6, the same as the flagship WCW Saturday Night should be noted that in those days, TBS reached far more homes than USA, so those same percentages actually meant significantly more people were still watching WCW on cable. However, it was syndicated television that promoted the house shows, still the backbone of the business, and was considered more important. WWF did have stronger syndicated numbers than WCW.

But after Japan, the WWF embarked on another overseas tour, a nine- event "WWF Rampage" tour of the United Kingdom. All nine shows sold out, eight of them four months before the shows even took place. While the U.S. was no longer on fire, and about to plummet, the company had found a fertile market. Plans were made to reward England with SummerSlam the next year at Wembley Stadium. During the dark years, it was the success in Europe that kept the company from financially sinking to near oblivion.

But there were two huge stories in the spring in the U.S. before the Zahorian trial. The first was a lengthy battle over Sid Eudy. The 6-foot-8 and 295 pound muscle head looked like a living embodiment of Frankenstein on steroids to the point you would almost look at his neck for the bolts. Because of his look, he was the latest guy who everyone thought would be the next big thing to replace Flair and Hogan as the profession's big stars. WCW was grooming him for the spot as champion. Sting and Warrior had both failed the previous year. But this guy had a physical presence that they didn't have. He was bigger, more muscular and scarier than Hogan. But like with every other

pretender, he wasn't much in the ring. In those days, no promoter thought that mattered.

The week after Wrestlemania, McMahon, as he did in those days, was planning the next Wrestlemania. Warrior was becoming passé. Undertaker apparently didn't have the juice to headline. Hogan vs. Sid Vicious was his idea. After all, when business was down, and it was a little down, McMahon's natural inclination is to go to the big guys. Vicious was the most muscular big guy in the business. Vicious was under contract to WCW through September 5 on a \$260,000 per year deal, and made it clear to anyone who would listen, that no matter what, on September 6 he was headed to WWF. However, he asked to get out of his contract early to start with WWF in June. When asked what it would take to keep him, he demanded a raise to \$400,000 per year, which would make him the third highest paid wrestler in the company behind Flair and Luger, and ahead of Sting. He also asked for two months off every summer. He had already gotten the nickname Softball Sid, when the previous year, after suffering a collapsed lung taking one of Scott Steiner's unique moves (that Steiner quit doing afterwards), he was booked to be in corners at house shows, but no showed the dates, and instead was playing in a softball league at his home in West Memphis, AR. WCW also sent WWF a nasty legal letter claiming they were tampering with contract personnel.

Vicious also complained that he was being asked to do jobs for Sting and Luger, and in the dressing room, was spouting off that he'd done more jobs than Tim Horner. A week later, Vicious agreed to a new WCW contract for three years at \$350,000 per year, plus PPV bonuses that would put him well over his \$400,000 asking price. Vicious verbally agreed to the deal. Then, when presented the contract, Vicious said that he'd been promised the main event at Wrestlemania in 1992 at the Hoosier Dome. Rather than have an unhappy camper on his hands, Jim Herd agreed to let Vicious out of his contract provided he put El Gigante over in a stretcher match at the May 19 PPV. He really didn't even wind up doing that. While WCW was upset, thinking a Vicious vs. Gigante house show program would draw money, their much-hyped first ever meeting in tag match on television drew only a 2.5 rating, below the average for the WCW Saturday Night show.

While most of McMahon's publicity stemming from the early year problems was negative, he got a tremendously positive, and long, article in *Sports Illustrated*, which was a huge coup. The Persian Gulf controversy was almost dismissed in the article proclaiming McMahon as the promotional genius of the era. He was the man who had taken pro wrestling from the smoke-filled halls to the major arenas. The fact he had competition doing equal numbers on cable wasn't even addressed. The article came a few months before the steroid trial, so that wasn't a factor. About the only negative thing in the article was members of the Cauliflower Alley Club knocking him for ruining wrestling. The CAC Club annual meeting was held the night before Wrestlemania, in Studio City, CA. McMahon, mad at the statement, didn't want anyone from the organization to attend. In one of the crudest practical jokes of that time, Stu Hart, who I'd bumped into at the airport few days before Mania, got all excited hearing about the banquet in town, particularly when he learned that Lou Thesz and Buddy

Rogers would be there. He asked for directions to get there from someone in the organization, and was given fake directions, so he wouldn't break WWF ranks and attend. He got lost, and never made it. As it turned out, Rogers died the next year, and Hart never did see him again.

The NWA/WCW title deal was put back together at SuperBrawl on May 19 at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg. Flair pinned Fujinami in 18:36 by spoofing the Tokyo finish. This time Hattori was bumped, and Flair got a rolling reverse cradle and held the trunks while Alfonso ran in to count the fall. They didn't understand that by this point the fan base had changed. Fans no longer got mad at heels for screw-job finishes on big shows. In fact, Flair was cheered again in this match. But they got mad at the promotion for providing them, hurting what had been a very good match. Still, buddies Sting & Luger and the Steiner Brothers tore down the house in a *****, match before a nearly full house of 6,000 fans, which was 4,887 paying \$76,000. WCW did nothing to build up Fujinami. Fujinami had a very impressive win over Vicious a year earlier on New Japan television which could have killed two birds with one stone, but WCW felt Fujinami wasn't going to draw, and made sure it was right. Not one Fujinami match aired, nor interview. While the title vs. title deal was there, it was only an issue in Japan as fans in the U.S. were never told there was a difference between the NWA and WCW titles. The show only did 140,000 buys on PPV. As was the custom, WWF ran a long house show the night before in Tampa, headlined by Warrior vs. Undertaker, which drew \$1,000 paying \$56,000. But worse, that weekend saw cable ratings for wrestling hit their lowest level in history, as WWF's All-American drew a 2.3, Prime Time did a 2.2, WCW Main Event did a 2.1, and WCW Saturday Night did a 1.7, barely half of what the show averaged one year earlier. After the numbers came in, a directive was sent out to everyone in WCW that in order to improve ratings, all of the TBS and syndicated shows were to have less emphasis on promoting future PPV and house shows, and more on hyping matches that would air on television. Worse, that was the week when word got out that NBC has canceled all future WWF programming.

The SuperBrawl show was also notable for some bizarre ring entrances. Matt Osborne, who later became the original Doink the Clown in WWF, was playing the role of a lumberjack called Big Josh. On this night he came to the ring with dancing bears that walked on their hind legs. If that wasn't bad enough, in the very next match, one of the most embarrassing moments in company history took place. They had spent months building up the appearances of a character named Oz, forgetting that in the famed "Wizard of Oz," Oz was a place and not a person. It was supposed to be the big career break for future WWF champion Kevin Nash. To say the people hated it would be nice. He came out as this fog, made of some chemical that smelled like sulphur, filled the arena. Nash pinned Tim Parker in 27 seconds. This set new levels for something stinking, as the gimmick was a flop, the match barely happened, and the stench at the arena was revolting. Then came El Gigante vs. Vicious in the stretcher match. Vicious had been talking openly about no-showing. Herd said that if he did, he wouldn't get his release, meaning his WWF debut would be delayed four months. Although normally they weren't hot on things like this in the middle of a war, and with what they wanted as their top attraction doing a PPV job, WWF officials were also adamant that Vicious fulfill his

commitment, so they could get him going. Literally nobody knew what Vicious would do, and the format sheet the day of the show listed Gigante vs. One Man Gang. But Vicious came, got pinned in 2:11 of a match he exerted no effort in, and walked off, refusing to do the stretcher job. Whatever intrigue about the battle of the giants was gone 30 seconds into the match when it became clear neither had a clue how to make it work. The ending was to symbolize the career of Vicious. A million pushes and tremendous hype. Scenarios that on paper made promoters salivate. But in the end, it was always a disappointment and never paid off.

The latest plan to save the company was Luger, who was to finally get the title from Flair on July 14 at the Great American Bash in Baltimore. This ended up going down in history as perhaps the worst PPV event from a major company of all-time. Luger was the company's second highest paid wrestler, at \$600,000 per year, and the top brass felt that they had to justify such a large salary, since Flair wasn't drawing with the belt anyway.

Flair, who was 42 and had spent the past nearly three years being put out to pasture, and then recalled. He had one year left on his contract at \$730,000 per year. He was holding doing the job over the company's head in exchange for a two-year contract extension. At that age, he was looking for whatever he could get out of his career, which most at the time felt was coming to a close. He was getting in the gym business, operating a chain of "Ric Flair's Gold's Gyms" in the Carolinas and later in St. Maarten, and needed proof of a stable income to help get the financing. WCW was agreeable to the two-year extension, but only if Flair was agreeable to a salary cut to \$350,000 per year, since they felt Flair wasn't going to be working main events any longer. Flair wasn't, and both sides were at an impasse. The company's final offer was two years at \$350,000 and a third year at \$250,000, but would cut back greatly on the maximum number of dates per year he could work, particularly in year three. The \$950,000 over three years was considerably less than the deal worth well in excess of \$1.2 million over the same period offered to Vicious, who had no track record of a draw, nor Flair's name value or in-ring ability, and his potential was clearly theoretical as opposed to proven. But Vicious was ten years younger than Flair. It was also considerably less than WCW had offered Randy Savage just five weeks earlier, a \$500,000 per year offer, which Savage turned down, which was more controversial since Savage and Flair were in the same age bracket. Figuring Flair wasn't going to drop the title in Baltimore, Herd called a last second audible, changing plans for Flair to instead drop the title to Barry Windham (who, in the irony of all ironies, was working without a contract and could have won the belt and jumped) at a TV taping on July 1 in Macon, with the idea Windham would then lose to Luger on the PPV. It should be noted that July 1 fell in the middle of a company approved one week vacation for Flair, and nobody expected him to be in Macon. After Flair's attorney, Dennis Guthrie, told Herd that Flair wasn't coming to Macon, Herd faxed Guthrie a termination notice. At the taping in Macon, which aired five days later on TBS, it was announced that Flair had been stripped of the title due to contractual problems and that Luger and Windham would battle for the vacant belt in Baltimore.

While wrestling rarely got mainstream press, the firing of the long-time flagship performer on TBS ran nationally on the wire services. Howard Johnson, a TV sportscaster in

Charlotte, and Tom Sorenson, a columnist for the *Charlotte Observer*, both fans of Flair, called for a boycott of WCW events. Whatever legacy the NWA title had also ended with this chain of events and a few days later, the NWA board released a statement saying that "The National Wrestling Alliance board wants to make abundantly clear to wrestling fans and the general public that the National Wrestling Alliance continues to recognize Ric Flair as NWA world heavyweight champion.

At the time, most fans didn't see NWA and WCW as anything but the same. In its history, dating back to Lou Thesz being awarded the title after Orville Brown's car accident, the NWA title had always changed hands in the ring. While the WWF had surpassed the NWA title in prominence in 1984 due to Hogan's drawing power and stronger television exposure, the NWA title still had whatever historical value was worth as the "real" title because of its legacy in using worked history to trace it back to people like Frank Gotch, Strangler Lewis and Thesz, the biggest names in history.

On July 8, just seven days after stripping him of the title and firing him, WCW offered Flair a one-year contract extension of his existing deal at \$750,000, but Flair, figuring it was now or never when it came to making the move to WWF, turned down the offer.

The July 14 Great American Bash was so bad that it got 96% thumbs down. It couldn't have started out worse. Three of the company's best workers were put on a scaffold, along with P.N. News. Scaffold matches were notoriously dangerous, and very limited in what could be done. The only purpose was to build to the inevitable heel bump off the top. Well, both heels in this one, Steve Austin & Terry Taylor, had bad knees, so they, without letting fans know, changed the rules that the winner just had to get across the scaffold and capture the flag on the other side. Bobby Eaton captured the flag so he and News won. Neither of the announcers, let alone any of the fans, knew it was the finish. A series of bad matches followed, with the most memorable part of the show being the loud "We Want Flair" chants. While there have been numerous wrestlers historically who have left companies which have resulted in those companies business dropping greatly, Flair's departure from WCW was unique historically. At arenas, almost nightly, from this show in July 1991 until March 1993, the biggest chants were invariably "We Want Flair." The many times Hogan left WWF, there were never any chants. Even when Steve Austin left WWF, it didn't happen. With Flair, the chants never ended. The show ended with a chain match and two cage matches. The commission then made it clear the day of the show that no blood would be allowed, and the second cage match, Missy Hyatt & Rick Steiner vs. Arn Anderson & Paul E. Dangerously (Paul Heyman) would have to be switched because the Maryland State Athletic Commission had a rule prohibiting man vs. woman confrontations. Everyone was running for cover on this one, because if the company was aware of this rule, it shouldn't have advertised the match. If the company wasn't, the commission was at fault because they gave the commission the line-up and had advertised the match on television for weeks. To get out of it, Dick Murdoch and Dick Slater kidnaped Hyatt and carried her away before the match started, and Steiner pinned Heyman in 2:08 to win the match. And that's how they ended the show. The climax of the bad night was that as Murdoch was carrying Hyatt to the

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back, a fan took a poke at him. Murdoch dropped Hyatt on her head so he could take a pop at the fan. Earlier, in a match that contained little but "We Want Flair" chants, Luger beat Windham in the cage match when they tried a double-turn finish. Luger went heel, aligning himself with manager Harley Race, turning Windham face. But nobody really cared.

Still, the show drew 7,000 fans, which was 5,500 paying \$99,000. Even without Flair (although many fans had bought tickets when Flair vs. Luger was the advertised main), it was the biggest gate for a WCW U.S. event in one year. But at 130,000 buys, it was the company's weakest live PPV event in its history.

On WWF syndicated television that aired on August 10, Bobby Heenan did promos, carrying the same belt that had been both the NWA and WCW world title belt for the past several years, saying that the real world champion, Ric Flair, would be coming. In those days, no matter how big a star someone was, WWF felt the need to remake them. When Sid Vicious arrived a few months earlier, he was renamed Sid Justice. It would have been stupid to have changed Flair, but they had to anyway, with the doctrine that he could not be called "Nature Boy." But everything else was the same. His gimmick? He was the real world champion. However, the decision was also made not to acknowledge his past, and all the babyfaces, like Monsoon, claimed not to even know what Heenan was talking about with the Flair title claim. Flair was portrayed him as a bogus imposter instead of a long-time recognized champion who never lost in the ring, and whose belt had credibility equal to Hogan's.

Flair was technically still under a WCW contract through September 1, when he had verbally agreed to start with WWF. Sensing the embarrassment to WCW that a Hogan vs. Flair program, which would in fans' minds be the true unification match, would be taking place in WWF rings, Herd and Jack Petrik had a secret meeting with Flair. This time he was offered Rhodes' job as booker to come back, and more money than he had asked for in the first place when wanting the extension. He turned it down. While not having signed a contract, McMahon and Flair had made plans for him to debut on September 9 at a TV taping in Cornwall, ONT. The first ever Hogan vs. Flair match would take place on October 25 in Oakland. McMahon also made Flair a verbal promise when he signed a three year contract. If at any time, Flair would be booked as anything but a main eventer, he gave Flair his word that he would let him out of his contract if he received a better offer elsewhere, which included WCW. In the middle of a wrestling war, nobody could have possibly believed such an unwritten promise would be lived up to in crunch time. But it was.

McMahon paid even more money for his next big acquisition, Lou Ferrigno of TV's "Incredible Hulk" fame, for his fledgling World Bodybuilding Federation. Yes, in the midst of incredible heat over steroids, McMahon had one year earlier started a bodybuilding promotion. He vowed that both his bodybuilders and his wrestlers would be drug free. None of his bodybuilders took him seriously, realizing that without steroids, there is no such thing as professional bodybuilding. His wrestlers had been given speech after speech about getting off steroids, and some took it seriously, but many others still didn't. Certainly the pushing of an untalented oaf like Sid Eudy while publicly saying you were cracking down

on steroids led a lot of wrestlers to believe steroids were as much a part of wrestling as they were to bodybuilding. And as time went on, that was proven to be correct. It was, after all, three months since McMahon publicly talked about steroid testing, and nobody had been tested. After signing, Ferrigno immediately went on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and brought up that he signed because the WBF would be steroid free bodybuilding. Most of the wrestlers knew the score well enough to know that at 42, there was no way Ferrigno could compete at the top level drug free. And as time went on, that turned into an interesting issue. Few at the time realized, that due to Hogan's statements on Arsenio Hall and who he pissed off, that there was going to be a moment of truth, and everyone involved was about to be hit hard.

The last big event of the summer, SummerSlam of 1991 took place on August 26 in Madison Square Garden. It turned out to be a memorable show for a lot of different reasons. A sellout crowd of nearly 20,000 fans paid \$445,000, and it did 375,000 buys on PPV. Unknown to just about everyone, major trouble was brewing. The show was billed as "The Match Made in Heaven and The Match Made in Hell."

The headliners were Hogan & Warrior in a handicap match against the forces of Iraqi evil, Slaughter & Mustafa & Adnan, with Justice as referee, to finally end the angle, along with the Savage & Elizabeth wedding. The story was that nobody knew if Justice was going to be a babyface or a heel, and the referee bit would tell the story. But 12 years later, the most memorable thing on the show was the undercard match where Bret Hart beat Mr. Perfect in 18:04 with a sharpshooter to win the IC title. It was Hart's first singles title in the WWF. Perfect had blown out his back nine weeks earlier, and while this was considered the company's best big show match since the Steamboat-Savage match four years earlier, it both Perfect's last match for two years and the match which established Hart as a top singles star. But as skilled as Hart was, nobody understood at the time that the repercussions from this summer, would result, a little more than a year later, in Hart being a totally different standard-bearer for the company than anyone would have thought. Yet another big issue was going on behind the scenes. A few weeks before the show, Warrior had demanded \$1 million per PPV event or he was going to quit, as well as a similar, easier road schedule that Hogan had, wanting to work only weekends. Warrior, due to being such a merchandise phenomenon and popular with young children, at the time the company's target audience, was earning in excess of \$2 million per year, more than any wrestler in history besides Hogan had ever earned. But he felt he should be paid equal to Hogan. The company had to put up with Hogan because of his drawing power and because to the outside world, he was the man in wrestling. They weren't as interested in a "Weekend Warrior," even though for the first time he was drawing in the same ballpark as Hogan. McMahon, figuring he had to save the show, apparently agreed to it (this would be the subject of much legal action). A finish was worked out where Warrior would be taken out, Hogan would pin Slaughter, and Hogan and Justice would pose together in the ring as friends, with perhaps a glare ala Hogan and Savage to set the stage for Wrestlemania. Two days later, Warrior was fired, ruining a well built up house show program with Jake Roberts, set to start in mid-October.

That was quickly switched during "The Match Made in Heaven." On the PPV, the wedding went on without a hitch, except live, where it didn't get over at all to most of the crowd aside from the small minority of women fans were in tears for much of it. People were leaving the building in droves, as this was put on after Hogan's match. Those who stayed didn't react much to anything that went on. On TV the next week, they showed a post-show angle where Savage and Elizabeth were opening gifts, and out of the box came a cobra. As Savage consoled Elizabeth, he was hit from behind by an um by Undertaker and laid out. Roberts then threatened Elizabeth with a snake and she was screaming uncontrollably. The snake theoretically bit her, and finally Justice made the save. But there were problems, as the "retired" Savage didn't want to go back on the road full-time, leaving Justice vs. Roberts matches in the cities Savage wouldn't work.

But the biggest program of them all, at least theoretically, Hogan vs. Flair at house shows, was about to start. House show business hadn't been strong for either company most of the year, but that match was expected to turn things around by some, and take the focus away from Hogan's out-of-the-ring issues and back on his matches. But the power of the Hogan-Flair program was not the company's prevailing view, because to believe that would be to acknowledge that a star created elsewhere could help draw numbers that all the company's created stars couldn't do.

The story of the WCW invasion was written a decade earlier, in the Hogan-Flair program. A few weeks before the first match, I spoke with Pat Patterson, who said he expected the matches to do very good business, but pointed out that it wouldn't do as well as you think at first because "Our fans don't know Flair. It will be okay at first, but it's not like it would draw what a match like Hogan vs. Undertaker would draw." I was of the impression that Hogan vs. Flair would draw great until Flair became established on WWF television as a regular, at which point the idea that the outside biggest star from the opposition was facing Hogan aura would be dead, and at that point, it would probably turn into just another Hogan program.

As 1991 was coming to a close, WCW was trying to find its way, and it wasn't long before there were several front office upheavals, including the return to wrestling of Bill Watts as head man in the company. McMahon had yet to start steroid testing, but its effect on wrestling and bodybuilding, if done for real, looked to be nothing short of gigantic. Hogan and Flair did have their program, working all over the country at house shows, yet never on PPV. And WWF was about to be hit with bad media publicity that made the Gulf War and steroid problems look like a day in the park, and this time, McMahon and the WWF went down hard in the most controversial period in company history. The biggest casualty was the McMahon-Hogan relationship, leading to Hogan leaving the company that he had made larger than any wrestling company in the 100 year history of this unique entertainment form.

MARCH 1, 2004

The period from late 1991 through early 1992 was another of the most pivotal periods in wrestling history. The industry was going through its biggest scandal of the modern era, and the

results of it saw the industry go into the toilet in 1992, and not emerge from it until Eric Bischoff's creation of Nitro in 1995 began to revitalize the industry the next year.

A lot of that is forgotten today, because it would be almost impossible for such a thing to be repeated. There were so many things different in society at that time. While steroids, which got a lion's share of the publicity, were around in many sports, the public wasn't nearly as aware of them and either as accepting of them, or as numb to realize the futility and unavoidable hypocrisies of the subject. The WWF did itself no credit in the wake of the 1991 trial of Dr. George T. Zahorian, who was convicted on charges of supplying steroids and painkillers to pro wrestlers and spent a few years in prison. The company's attempt to act as if Zahorian's case had nothing to do with them didn't go over well with anyone, particularly when the witnesses testifying they were getting steroids were largely from the WWF, and Zahorian was selling steroids at WWF events and to the company's owner and biggest star.

There was a cloud hanging over the business in late 1991. Behind the scenes, it appeared all hell was going to break loose, because several media outlets were working on stories about Hogan lying on Arsenio Hall when he claimed he had only used steroids three times in his life, all for injury rehabilitation. Nobody knew what the effect would be, but those in the WWF were in denial, thinking it was a story that would blow away and have no effect on the company. The company developed a powerful adversary in Phil Mushnick of the *New York Post*. What almost nobody realized while the steroid story was simmering and about to explode, was that one person after another attempted to contact Mushnick with tales of sexual misconduct in the WWF, including McMahon's personal limo driver, Jim Stuart, who appeared to be more teasing having great stories and perhaps, like many involved, was looking to be paid to shut up by McMahon.

While the veracity of many of the claims was dubious, in hindsight, others were not. Lee Cole called up Mushnick in late 1991, claiming to have a story that would make the steroid issues Mushnick had been writing about seem like nothing. He claimed his younger brother, Tom, had been working as a ring boy, helping set up the rings at various WWF shows in the Northeast. His brother loved wrestling, and still follows it today. He claimed there were strange episodes involving Mel Phillips, who had a propensity for fondling young boys' feet. This was hardly a secret in the business, since there was a joke inside about what was Mel Phillips favorite type of vehicle, with the answer being a toe truck. McMahon had at least once before this warned Phillips, but he was still in charge of the ring crew when this story broke, and also worked as a ring announcer. But more damaging, Tom Cole said he was brought to the home one night of Terry Joyal (former wrestler Terry Garvin, who had worked in booking). He claimed Joyal was looking for sexual favors from his brother, who turned him down, and was then tired from his job. But it was more than that. Lee Cole described a homosexual ring around the company, in as sordid a means as possible. Lee Cole himself had his own questionable background, as it would turn out, as would almost everyone on both sides of what turned out to be one of the most important chapters in company history. If Lee Cole had been the only one making a call like that to

Mushnick, that could have been damaging enough, but as time went on, it was just the tip of the iceberg. At first there were other names of young boys of ring boys who came forward to back up Cole's assertions, and, just as quickly, when the publicity broke, they would deny those stories or disappear.

McMahon expected Billy Graham would come forward since his lawyers were looking for a settlement before even filing a lawsuit. Because of all the bad publicity that could be avoided, they expected a quick settlement. The lawsuit largely blamed WWF for Graham's myriad of health problems related to steroid use. The problem with Graham's case is that he started taking steroids in 1965, long before he got into pro wrestling. He continued throughout his career, which ended in 1988, when he was told by his doctor that the avascular necrosis that had destroyed the bones in his hips and ankles was caused from his years of steroid use. While Graham was a huge star for the WWWF in the late 70s and early 80s, and even sold out Madison Square Garden as a headliner as late as 1987, his career with both McMahon's companies was a very small part of his tenure as a steroid user. McMahon's attorneys were confident the case was going nowhere. The strange part of all this is that Graham was one of McMahon's favorite wrestlers, and like everyone with the people who heavily influenced them, and in Graham's case, he created much of the Hulk Hogan character, it was hard for him to dislike Graham. Hogan idolized Graham when he started attending matches as a second row regular at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa when Graham was feuding with Dusty Rhodes in Tampa just before his WWWF championship run, and the two later became good friends. Graham was physically destroyed, and in constant pain from health problems that plagued him from the early 80s when his body started breaking. While few are aware of this, during this period, McMahon attempted to reach out to Graham and settle things, but did not want to deal with lawyers. Graham wouldn't talk to McMahon at the time, feeling all talking should go through his lawyers, who McMahon wasn't willing to deal with. Graham had also sued the companies that manufactured the steroids. After a deposition where McMahon's attorney, Jerry McDevitt, had done his usual job on Graham, McDevitt conceded that he also liked Graham, and thought Graham was entitled to a settlement, but from the drug companies, and not the WWF. He even said if the circumstances had been different, he'd have loved to have represented Graham in that case.

Bruno Sammartino had been vociferous on the subject in media interviews, as he had been outspoken against the use of steroids. But the WWF higher-ups convinced themselves this story would go away. It was a business that largely protected its own, and the feeling was Graham and Sammartino, neither of whom were active stars, would be the lone voices to talk about steroids. The WWF felt it controlled the wrestling fans with the television and Hogan was so popular he was bullet-proof, so the company continued to back up Hogan's claim that he had only used steroids to rehab injuries, walking arrogantly into a landmine anyone close to the situation could see would inevitably happen when you mix a celebrity with outright dishonesty and fed-ex records showing package after package from a convicted drug doctor to the celebrity's home, to one of his best friends, as well as to the head offices of the company

itself. But Hogan's public image was already taking a beating by this point, with the Hulk Hogan Vitamin company, which advertised a popular national brand of kids vitamins, going out of business shortly after the Zahorian trial and Hogan's Arsenio Hall appearance. The idea that young children were encouraged to take vitamins to become big and strong like Hogan was not lost on a lot of people, and created its own set of jokes, such as Hogan vitamins coming in both oral and injectables.

The WWF felt that they could argue that neither Graham nor Sammartino had been with the company in years, and that even if things were once that way, they could argue the business had changed.

Still, in November, when no steroid tests had been done after the company had announced the most stringent steroid testing in sports back in July, both "Entertainment Tonight" and "Inside Edition," both highly rated shows at the time, scheduled pieces. The day before the E.T. piece and two days before the I.E. piece, the company held its first company-wide steroid test in New Haven. As funny as this sounds with the timing, McMahon had scheduled the test before knowing the dates of the pieces. The results were worse than McMahon feared, or so he claimed. Despite being told in July to get off steroids, 20 of the 41 wrestlers tested positive for steroids. That figure was not released for a few months. But even before the results came in, McMahon had said to us ahead of time that the testing would be to determine levels of steroids in people's system. Nobody was going to be suspended, but in the second round of testing, scheduled for several weeks later, if those who failed didn't get their levels of steroids down, then they would be suspended for six weeks. There were also doctors who handled drug testing in other sports who claimed testing for levels was inaccurate and were critical of this policy. The reason they didn't "count" the first test, perhaps because of the fear that if they did they'd have to not enforce it because they wouldn't have had enough people to tour. There was another reason as well. Some steroids, such as decaburabol, which was one of the more popular steroids of that era, could have stayed in people's system from before July (highly unlikely, but not impossible), before the controversy broke and the wrestlers were told to get off steroids. Of course then, as now, there was no testing for Growth Hormone, and it has become clear in time that a few wrestlers were using GH to maintain their size and cuts during this crackdown. Ironically, to show just how serious McMahon was about the testing, in late 1992, he fired both Ultimate Warrior and Davey Boy Smith, his top two babyfaces at the time, because of his belief they were using GH imported from England. Clenbuterol, which had become the favorite drug of many in WCW at the time, would have also passed the WWF's test.

Both news stories were completed before WWF did its first testing. Right before the pieces were to air, Steve Planamenta, the WWF's p.r. director at the time, called both shows to tell them the company had just done its first tests that night in New Haven. Inside Edition didn't even bother to change its story, and just after the piece ran, had a host making a snide remark about them doing testing and the coincidental timing with the story. Entertainment Tonight, which was the more powerful show, changed its entire story, rushing to get new comments from Sammartino. Graham's attorneys, still looking for a settlement, had him turn down interviews with both shows. The Entertainment

Tonight story was embarrassing to the company, since they went to New Haven that night to interview wrestlers. McMahon said that every wrestler took the test and nobody complained (there were those who did complain, even with more than four months of warning this was coming). E.T. then interviewed Dusty Wolfe, who said he heard about testing, but that he himself didn't take a test. This made McMahon appear to be a liar. McMahon was furious, saying that he told E.T. that "extras," a category Wolfe fell into, weren't being tested. E.T. officials at the time claimed they were never told that every wrestler meant only contract performers, and were never told extras didn't count. McMahon himself called up E.T. after the piece, furious he'd been made to look bad by Wolfe's comments. He then attempted to question the credibility of Sammartino and Alex Marvez, both of whom appeared on the piece. E.T., in response, aired a second piece where McMahon came on. McMahon claimed that Hogan was the first in line to take the test and wanted the results of his test made public (Hogan's physique underwent rapid changes over the next few months, and by Wrestlemania, he looked less physically impressive than he would look when he was 50 years old) to clear his name and prove his physique came from devotion to physical fitness and not steroids. Ironically, a few years later, McMahon would run pieces on Raw basically implying Hogan and Randy Savage's physiques at their ages to look the way they did were because of steroids, when challenging WCW to adhere to the same steroid plan they were putting their talent through. Jim Duggan aired on the piece, saying he'd worked hard to get his physique and resented insinuations he took any shortcuts, which was unintentionally funny. Ric Flair was also on, claiming to be the "cleanest thing going today."

The steroid controversy couldn't have come at a good time, but this was the worst time possible since McMahon had started a sister company, the ill-fated World Bodybuilding Federation. McMahon was a lifelong fan of bodybuilding, which is interesting because his son-in-law, HHH, grew up idolizing both wrestlers and bodybuilders just like Vince. He thought he could use pro wrestling promotional tactics to take bodybuilding mainstream like he did wrestling. The head honchos of bodybuilding were the aging Weider Brothers, Joe, who had a huge magazine empire that also sold supplements and equipment, and Ben, who was the president of the International Federation of Bodybuilders. Vince must have felt that the Weiders were just like the regional wrestling promoters, guys sitting on a monopoly business and weighing it down with a lack of creative ideas. Vince contacted Tom Platz, a popular bodybuilder as his head of the company, and in a McMahon like move, went to the Mr. Olympia contest, the Weiders' showcase event, and signed up as a sponsor, only to pass out leaflets at the show about his running opposition, with the battle cry, "We're here." He offered the bodybuilders six-figure guaranteed contracts to basically train and party, which infuriated his wrestlers, none of whom were getting guaranteed money in those days and were working an insane schedule. He bought TV time on the USA Network for a promotional show that drew poor ratings. He tried to get wrestling fans to cross over by featuring Lex Luger as a star on the show in a role of an arrogant pro wrestling like heel. Luger, who was earning \$500,000 per year as WCW world champion and hating it, was offered \$350,000 per year by McMahon, but he didn't have to wrestle. Even though Luger had time left on his WCW contract, he went to new WCW Vice President Kip Frey, told him he was retiring

from wrestling to become a pro bodybuilder for McMahon, and Frey released him from his contract contingent upon Luger signing a non-compete clause that he couldn't appear on wrestling shows. Of course, the first thing McMahon did was put him on wrestling shows, and WCW threatened a lawsuit. McMahon backed off, and Luger was limited to the bodybuilding shows. Luger just had to train and do McMahon's weekly TV show that he and Vince himself co-hosted. He often had wrestlers cut corny promos about the bodybuilders on the wrestling show, and did numerous cross-promotional efforts. But the WBF really hadn't made any waves with its first show. McMahon spent a year building up a second show for PPV, and signed Lou Ferrigno, "The Incredible Hulk" of TV fame, and before that a top Mr. Olympia contender, as his marquee star. Ferrigno was past 40, but was enough of a celebrity that his signing made a lot of media and he became spokesperson for the group. Publicly, because of the steroid heat, Ferrigno claimed he was joining the WBF because they would have the most stringent steroid testing anywhere. Privately it was another story. At the time, McMahon told me that he was going to promote a drug-free professional bodybuilding contest and change the course of bodybuilding, to make it a healthy sport. When Ferrigno signed, McMahon told me about a meeting he had with the bodybuilders, telling them his goal and that they would be tested like the wrestlers. He went into some detail about the meeting, including what he told the bodybuilders and their reservations about suddenly not being the biggest guys in the gym anymore. This is one of the great McMahon stories of all-time. The meeting McMahon told me about in November of 1991 actually happened. And went pretty much as he said it did. But it didn't happen until late February of 1992. The funny thing was that all the questions McMahon said the bodybuilders brought up in this meeting, were brought up when the real meeting took place, almost all by his top star, Gary Strydom. This wasn't the world's greatest acting job, since the bodybuilding magazines at the time, with no knowledge that McMahon had likely scripted much of the meeting, said that it appeared to some of the bodybuilders that Strydom's questions were planted. What McMahon didn't count on when he told the bodybuilders about the heat the company was under and they had to get off drugs, was that Ferrigno would then quit. Ferrigno's feeling was that he had an image to uphold, and he couldn't afford to be in a situation where it could come out he failed a drug test, and actually threw a tirade at the meeting, taking off his shirt to show an incredible physique, and telling the guys that if Joe unknown bodybuilder failed a steroid test, nobody would care, but that he was an idol of kids around the world. While not saying it, within bodybuilding, the feeling was, at past 40, he simply couldn't have been competitive clean. Publicly, Ferrigno claimed he needed operations on both hands due to pain from carpal tunnel syndrome, and had to back out of the contest. The IFBB had just steroid tested one Olympia, but since it was poorly received, it was quietly dropped. McMahon's "bodybuilding as it was meant to be" credo that he said at first was believed to have been a code term for no drug tests, even though McMahon had put it in the contracts that he would have the right to do so. As it turned out, 10 of McMahon's 13 bodybuilders failed the first drug test, and were suspended, with the suspension being lifted just in time for them to participate in the contest. At the contest, McMahon lauded the physiques on the air as an example of what you can do "drug free." Only 5,500 people ordered the PPV and before long, the WBF was history, which meant Lex Luger, his non-compete

time limit having expired, was back in pro wrestling, first using the name " Narcissus," and later, "The Narcissist."

But even though the so-called scandals ended up being far more significant in the direction of the industry over the next few years, most fans have forgotten about them. What many remember about late 1991 was the first Hogan vs. Flair feud. Much of what is talked about now is how it was botched, and how McMahon made a terrible decision because the two never headlined a PPV, and most notably didn't headline Wrestlemania VIII. Ironically, the numbers at the time tell a different story. While there is little doubt that feud should have been far more effective, the decision to do Hogan vs. Sid Justice (Sid Eudy) and Flair vs. Randy Savage at the Hoosier Dome wasn't considered a bad plan to almost anyone at the time it was finalized in January of 1992. The Hogan-Flair singles feud had already run its course at the house shows, and was no longer drawing well. The main cards got a shot of adrenaline and crowds went up when they dropped the singles program for the title, and started headlining with Hogan & Piper vs. Flair & Justice tag matches, where Flair would do the job every night. Hogan vs. Flair was yesterday's news when Mania was coming around and Hogan vs. Justice was the new match people wanted to see.

There were positives to the Mania match not being Hogan vs. Flair. Hogan vs. Justice was a first time match of monsters, while Hogan vs. Flair had been done everywhere and lost its steam. At the time, the house shows were hyped just as hard in the specific markets as the PPVs, so every market had seen the hype for the match, and many markets had seen it multiple times. The general rule was that PPV matches were the first-run matches. Also, as far as the show went, Flair vs. Savage at Wrestlemania had a tremendous storyline build-up with Flair claiming that he was with Elizabeth before Savage. Flair and Savage was a unique match-up that hadn't been done, and most likely it was a better match than Flair vs. Hogan would have been. Had Flair and Hogan been kept apart until Mania, and it was their first match ever, would it have been bigger than Hogan vs. Justice? Possibly, but by the time January rolled around, Vince McMahon had a choice between a feud that wasn't drawing, and a fresh match-up of giants, plus a second match of great workers with a good story. And for Flair and Hogan, the fact they never wrestled at Wrestlemania actually made it fresher in 1994 when they did their WCW feud. Arrogantly, WCW billed their first PPV match that year as the first time the two biggest stars in wrestling would have ever met, and even got Ted Turner himself to attend the press conference.

But when Flair debuted in a WWF ring in September of 1991, the Hogan vs. Flair feud was a match-up probably ten years in the making in some fans' eyes, and eight years in almost all fans' eyes. Hogan was the biggest star, by far, in the game. But Flair was the opposition's world champion, and had his own contingent of fans because he was the better wrestler. The two were scheduled to wrestle for the first time on October 25, 1991, at the Oakland Coliseum Arena. But as it turned out, with no fanfare, the first match took place three days earlier at a TV taping in Dayton, OH, in a short dark match. It was the final match after a marathon night of 30 bouts, where Flair was scheduled to wrestle Piper in the advertised main event. Hogan wasn't working a full schedule by 1991, so the first Flair WWF program had to be two-fold. Flair did his first angle with

Piper, and they worked most main events, but when there was a major market, Hogan would work. Piper also didn't want to be working full-time. Piper and Flair were best of friends, and Piper was even in Flair's wedding party. Piper had turned down doing jobs numerous times in WWF, but he had no problem putting Flair over every night. The two had met years earlier in the Carolinas, where they had a great rivalry over the U.S. title, which put the final stamp on Piper as arguably the top heel in the business, and someone who could draw anywhere.

Flair won the Dayton match via count out. The reason for the match was both Hogan and Flair, who had surprisingly never worked together even though both were superstars forever by that point, wanted a short try-out match. In addition, Hogan had taken two months off wrestling in the wake of the bad Zahorian press after Hogan's drawing power had taken a tumble. That may have been a factor in rushing the Flair feud, because of the feeling that program would get people away from talking about steroids when Hogan's name was brought up, and talk about the dream program.

It worked, to a degree. Their first-ever match advertised match, in Oakland, drew just shy of a sellout, with 13,400 paying \$157,842. It was the largest crowd in the building in several years. It was somewhat surprising that Flair had only about 15% of the audience behind him, which was consistent with most markets in the feud except in the Southeast, where it was 90% or more in the other direction. Flair used a foreign object passed to him by manager Bobby Heenan to apparently get the pin in 11:35. When the ref counted three, the place erupted, thinking they had seen history. There were far more cheers than boos. Flair was given the WWF title and announced as the new champion. Agent Dave Hebner then came out and told the ref about the foreign object. Hebner grabbed the belt and put it on Hogan's chest, signaling a reversed decision. Flair then put Hogan in the figure four after the match until The Hammer (Greg Valentine, no longer using that name) and The British Bulldog made the save. Flair had wanted to do his style match and go 25 to 30 minutes, and doing all his regular spots that he'd done with limited powerhouses like Nikita Koloff and Lex Luger. Hogan, who specialized in going a patterned 8-10 minutes, said there was no point in doing that match first. He told Flair before the show they would do a big match that would go 30 minutes when they headlined Wrestlemania. They did the same routine the next night in Los Angeles, before 12,400 paying \$178,740, going 13:28, and the following in Tempe, going 12:30 before 5,600 paying \$67,000. That same weekend, Flair had his first match in Madison Square Garden that anyone would remember. He had actually worked there twice in early 1976 in prelim matches that were long forgotten. But it was against Piper, and only drew 9,000 fans. On November 13, 1991, at a TV taping in New Haven, he worked his first match ever against then IC champ Bret Hart in a match taped for home video release but never airing on television.

Where WWF did botch the program is that Flair should have been positioned as an outsider coming in to prove he was better all along. He should have done grandstand challenges, and made it appear he was an intruder on the shows, and not just another WWF heel. McMahon should have stood in the way of the match, making it appear he was protecting Hogan and more, his title from an outsider, but Hogan would insist on it. Since Flair never lost the

WCW title in the ring, as he was fired by Jim Herd while champion, and belts were still the most important thing, this was the ultimate champion vs. champion program handed to McMahon. But the feeling was, to recognize Flair as a real champion would mean to recognize that there was another wrestling company. Of course everybody knew that, but WWF at the time was in a strange world that they believed they controlled. If they said there wasn't another company, then there isn't another company. The WWF in those days would publicly try to claim they weren't wrestling, and WCW was not their rival. The NBA, Disney, or whatever else were their rivals. While Bobby Heenan as an announcer and manager would call Flair the real champion, McMahon and Gorilla Monsoon would pretend not to even know what the belt was that he was carrying. Hogan's promos for the match said that in many people's eyes, this match was a big deal, but in his eyes, it was just another match. Pat Patterson felt the program would draw well, but the company's belief was that much of its audience really didn't know Flair. Once Flair was an established character on the TV, that's when the program would take off. Little did they understand that establishing Flair as a regular WWF character on TV was the worst thing they could do.

When it became the WWF's version of Ric Flair facing Hogan, the draw wasn't nearly as good. Flair had done almost no TV before Oakland and Los Angeles, and those were far better crowds than Hogan had been drawing against the established WWF stars by that point in time. But each week, with more Flair on TV, which should have strengthened the feud, instead saw the gates drop. The feud was doing its 6,000 to 10,000 fans, which was the best business Hogan had done in a while, but was losing steam in November. The biggest miscue was with the Survivor Series coming, Flair was put as part of a WWF team, with weeks of build-up of Flair as one of the guys, teaming with Ted DiBiase & The Mountie (Jacques Rougeau Jr.) & Warlord for a match against Piper, Hart, Bulldog and Virgil. The match had a terrible ending, as with just Bulldog and Warlord eliminated, everyone started brawling in the ring and were all disqualified, except Flair. He was out cold on the floor. So he lucked into being the sole survivor, but if he couldn't dominate against lesser lights like Piper, Hart, Bulldog and Virgil, how was he going to be taken as the special guy who was a threat to Hogan? Really, the damage was done before the match, during the build-up. Flair, with all his teammates, doing those classic WWF Survivor Series gimmick team interviews, because they made him out to be a "WWF heel," took the edge off the program in a hush-y.

An example of how quick the air came out of the feud is that on November 15, 1991, at the Cow Palace, coming off a great heat finish to their first match in Oakland, a rematch drew just 5,000 fans. Worse, it was a weak main event, with Hogan winning via a bad looking count out in 6:59, and was almost devoid of Flair fans. By the time they got to their first match in Madison Square Garden on November 30, 1991, they went a hot 9:25 with the fake win and foreign object DQ finish, before 15,000 fans. It was the best house show crowd in a year, but when they came back for the rematch on December 29, 1991 for the count out win for Hogan, the crowd was down to 11,000, which wasn't good for the post-Christmas show. A few days later, they wrestled in Flair's neck of the woods, at the Omni in Atlanta, and only drew 4,500 fans. Even if McMahon hadn't promised Sid Eudy the Wrestlemania main event to get him to jump, he had to have recognized the Hogan-Flair match had run its

course for the time being. Still, few remember this, and both Hogan and Flair have expressed disappointment they never got to do the match at Mania, even though in WCW, they had numerous PPV matches, with storylines that were a lot better promoted.

This storyline also wound up in court. Flair wore his old WCW/NWA world heavyweight title belt, claiming to be the "real world champion" when the feud started. Flair had told McMahon that he paid for the belt (he had put up the deposit money for it himself) and felt he owned it. The NWA went to court, and a legal precedent was set. The court ruled that the world title belt is an important symbol of the promotion and if Flair wore the NWA symbol any longer, the company could sue for damages. This decision came down on a Wednesday, and WWF was forced, immediately, to tell its affiliates around the world to cut the showing of the belt out of all TV shows immediately. Whether they did or not wasn't known, but virtually no stations edited the belt out. The NWA was going to be happy if just the top 30 markets edited the belt off the show, but as it turned out, none of the 30 did so. When Flair had to give the belt back, McMahon had a replica that looked almost identical to the NWA belt made, and Flair started wearing that. The NWA, funded by WCW, went to court again, and the judge ruled this was again violating the trademark of the NWA (this precedent bit WCW in the ass years later when WWF sued them over Madusa throwing the WWF women's title in the garbage can on Nitro). Finally, Flair started wearing a tag team title belt of the WWF, but a black spot was put over it so fans watching on TV assumed he was still wearing the old NWA belt. It was said that Jack Tunney was so furious about the bogus belt airing on television he had banned it from being shown. This lasted until the Royal Rumble, when Flair won the WWF title, and the storyline was dropped.

In the ring, the company was doing another experiment. At the time, it was doing four annual PPV events. McMahon tried out the idea of, after Survivor Series, held at the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit on November 27. The idea to do two events in a row is they would start by changing the title, still a rarity, by having Undertaker beat Hulk Hogan. Hogan had only lost once (or twice if you consider the Andre match on NBC) in nearly eight years, so that was expected to have a huge impact. They announced an immediate rematch for just a few days later in San Antonio, with a \$14.95 PPV price. The idea was that with the lower price and the heat finish that they could get the same audience back a few days later. In Detroit, after distraction from Flair, Undertaker used a tombstone piledriver on a chair and pinned Hogan in 12:43. However, only half of the audience that bought the first show bought the "Tuesday in Texas," rematch, with the shows doing 280,000 and 140,000 buys respectively. The experiment was not considered a success, and WWF never tried it again. The second show saw Hogan apparently win, only to have it overruled by Jack Tunney since Tunney saw Hogan throw the supposed ashes of whatever dead person was in the urn in Undertaker's face to set up the win. The title was held up, leading to the famed Royal Rumble where Flair went almost the entire distance and won the title.

The bomb dropped in March, just as the company was preparing for Wrestlemania. The Tom Cole story broke in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* while no names were mentioned in the story, or in later stories by Mushnick, days later Pat Patterson, Terry Garvin and Mel Phillips tendered their resignations. McMahon at the time was

very defensive of Patterson and Garvin at first (although as time went on, he only claimed Patterson as an innocent man caught up in a witch-hunt against homosexuals), and how both had been wronged and they did what they did because of extreme loyalty to the company. That was strange since the first connection anyone made with any of the names charged were when the WWF released the names, saying they had resigned. Neither Garvin nor Phillips were ever welcomed back to the company. McMahon claimed at the time that even though Patterson had done nothing wrong, he would never work for the company again. In hindsight, most question whether Patterson was ever even gone from the company, but he was back in an official capacity within a few months.

At the same time, David Shultz joined Graham in speaking out on a few television shows about Hogan and steroids, as well as more allegations against McMahon. Shultz had been bitter against McMahon for years after being fired, and had collected info and rumors and was planning on writing a book. He claimed that not only had Hogan done steroids his entire career, but was selling the drugs to other wrestlers when he first started in the Gulf Coast circuit. He claimed an affidavit from a wrestler who would say that. As it turned out, he had a written statement from a wrestler, signed, "The Assassin." I figured that was as bogus as it could get. As it turned out, Irv Muchnick, no relation to Phil, but the nephew of Sam, in a *People Magazine* article on the destruction of Hogan's rep, believed it to be real. He found out that Randy Culley worked as The Assassin on the circuit when Hogan was there. He tracked down Culley, who confirmed he sent the affidavit to Shultz and repeated those claims. It wasn't hard to get wrestlers to talk about Hogan and steroids, including former running buddies Billy Jack Haynes, another person with credibility issues, except when it came to Hogan and steroids, he was telling the truth, and Ken Patera. A major piece in the *Los Angeles Times* linked Hogan with both steroids and cocaine, which was picked up by numerous newspapers around the country, McMahon made the decision that Hogan was a lightning rod of bad publicity, and he and Hogan agreed that Hogan would wrestle through Wrestlemania, and then take a hiatus to let everything cool down. A front page story in the *London Daily Mirror* headlined "Hulk quits in cocaine shame." During that week, according to Hogan's friends, the pressure had gotten to where he had decided to retire from wrestling after Wrestlemania, except for working major Japan shots, and was wanting to move out of Tampa to Hawaii to get away from it all, the latter of which he didn't end up doing. On television, McMahon came up with a storyline for Mania that this may be Hogan's retirement and that after his match with Sid Justice, he was likely to make the announcement. With a lot of negativity toward Hogan, McMahon's angle made him a sympathetic character to wrestling fans. Even with all the hype that Hogan's decision would be at the show, Hogan must have had other plans. Since he was leaving, it was apparent they wanted the retirement. But at the show, Hogan never acknowledged the angle, nor said anything about retirement.

But it got even uglier. Shultz produced referee Mike Clark, who told a similar story to Cole's, regarding Garvin's behavior. Clark's story disappeared rather quickly, and for years I had just assumed it was one of a dozen stories that we were hearing of questionable credibility, as people were

coming out of the woodwork at this point. However, Elio Zarlenza, who worked for Jack Tunney in the WWF's Canadian office, has claimed he was there when the incident happened, and it was real. Tom Hankins, a prelim wrestler and long-time reader of this newsletter, wrote a letter talking about an incident in a bar with Patterson, where he claimed sexual favors were suggested, which landed him on the Phil Donahue show. Randall Barry Orton (who wrestled as Barry O and is the uncle of the current WWE star), a fairly talented prelim wrestler who had since been let go, claimed on the *Wrestling Insiders* radio show hosted by Mike Tenay, that Garvin had sexually harassed him. This was on a long trip when he was 19 years old, back in 1978, when he was working in the Amarillo territory. He questioned whether him turning Garvin down, with Patterson in the back seat with him. He questioned whether, with Garvin now in a power position, that may have been a reason for his career in WWF never advancing. Murray Hodgson, who briefly worked as an announcer before being fired, claimed Patterson had made a remark to him, saying "How do you taste," around the time he was fired. And worse, Rita Chatterton, who worked as ref Rita Marie, came forward with a claim against McMahon himself. Geraldine Rivera, who produced a show called "Now It Can Be Told," did a particularly damaging episode on McMahon. The show took kernels of what may have been true, but left out details that were important. For example, Orton's story was edited to make it seem like it happened very recently when he was working in WWF, and Patterson and Garvin were executives. McMahon was well aware Chatterton would go on television and talk about a sexual dalliance the two had in the mid-80s in the back seat of McMahon's limo, which he wasn't thrilled about, feeling it had nothing to do with business. This was before McMahon admitted publicly in interviews his numerous affairs. He was more shocked when he saw the piece and she more than implied it wasn't consensual.

Worse, on February 14th, about a half-dozen uniformed and two plain clothed St. Louis police officers along with a police dog and a Federal drug agent were sent to The Arena and searched all WWF personnel as they arrived. They found nothing. According to one report, all personnel had been tipped off just before arriving, or else it could have been a different story. It was believed the investigators were there after being tipped off that Kerry Von Erich was carrying drugs, but as it turned out, Von Erich had been pulled from all shows two weeks earlier when his father called the company and said his son needed to get off the road and go to rehab. However, he didn't, and a few days later, was arrested at a drugstore in a Dallas suburb on charges of passing forged drug prescriptions, and at that point the company felt they needed to let him go, and a year later he was dead. Road Warrior Hawk and Jimmy Snuka were suspended the same week for having failed the new tests. This was the first, but hardly the last of the new steroid policy wreaking havoc with storylines. The Legion of Doom held the tag titles, and were ordered to drop them to Money Inc., Ted DiBiase & Mike "IRS" Rotunda at a house show in Denver before Hawk was suspended. The drug raid, Ferrigno's quitting, the suspensions, and Garvin, Patterson and Phillips quitting all happened within a few week period.

McMahon and Sammartino were guests on "Larry King Live" while McMahon's empire was about to start crumbling. King, who had done no research on the story, backed McMahon, not understanding how he could have possibly been aware of what

was going on. McMahon claimed he had never even heard rumors of any sexual misconduct until they broke in the newspapers. However, Phillips had been fired four years earlier by McMahon, and then brought back. When Sammartino brought Phillips up on the show, McMahon responded that Mel Phillips was never an employee of Titan Sports, and had only worked as "an occasional laborer." McMahon conceded a few days later that he actually had worked as an independent contractor for the company almost every day. When Sammartino brought up Murray Hodgson, the WBF announcer, McMahon made Sammartino look bad by saying that Hodgson had never worked for the WBF, even though he was the announcer on the WBF's home video. He claimed Hogan had never denied using steroids on Arsenio Hall and claimed that nobody in the company was on steroids (Sid Eudy failed a steroid test only a few days later, but the company had largely cleaned up by that point). He also claimed not to know about Tom Cole, claiming the media was keeping Cole away from him, when in fact, at that very moment, they were working on a settlement.

Cole settled for roughly \$60,000 to \$70,000 in cash for two years back pay, and was given a multi-year contract to return to his former job as a ring boy, and given the impression, in time, that he could be a ring announcer. The settlement occurred just before McMahon was to appear on the Phil Donahue show.

Exactly what was and wasn't true is still uncertain. At the time, McMahon said that Patterson, nor anyone, knew who Hankins was and didn't know how to respond to it. Perhaps Patterson was just joking around in front of an audience at a Southern California bar when Hankins, who was small and didn't have a good physique, asked him if he could work for the company as a job guy. Hodgson, as it turned out, was a well-spoken con man, although he slammed McMahon in a face-to-face situation on Donahue, which McMahon conceded was quite a promo. It is believed Hodgson saw Patterson and Curt Hennig horsing around doing some sort of joke about Patterson, and after being fired, came up with the idea for a lawsuit. It wasn't the first time he'd sued an employer after termination. McMahon never denied the dalliance with Chatterton, but claimed to have been shocked beyond belief at her description of it. The night before, many of the same people appeared on John Arezzi's radio show in New York, a show sponsored by a local video dealer named Vince Russo. Cole was brought to the Donahue tapings and sat with Elizabeth Hulette and Linda McMahon in the audience, perhaps for a Perry Mason final scene when his story would come up and he'd shockingly be there and back McMahon. But his name never came up during the show, partially because Orton thought something was fishy when he couldn't get ahold of Cole, whom he had befriended.

The Donahue show saw an aggressive Donahue and a mentally beaten down McMahon, along with guests including Hodgson, Hankins, Orton, Graham, Sammartino, Arezzi and myself, saw a highly rated national broadcast make wrestling appear to be the sleaziest business in the world. Before the show started, the producers had decided to have Sammartino, since he was the local wrestling legend, and McMahon, in the center. Sammartino was seething mad from the King show, furious that he felt McMahon had lied to make it seem like Hodgson and Phillips didn't work for him, and made

Sammartino look ill-informed in the process. On King, Sammartino was in a studio in Pittsburgh while King was with McMahon. This time they would be face-to-face. Sammartino said that if McMahon lied again, he didn't know if he could help himself from taking a swing at him after what happened days earlier. I ended up being moved next to McMahon. During one commercial break, McMahon whispered to me saying he couldn't wait for it to end and it was the worst hour of his life. Hodgson, a total con man, had delivered an amazing speech that left McMahon with no comeback, an amazing irony with what happened with McMahon and Sammartino days earlier. When the show was over, McMahon couldn't wait to get out of the room. Before he left, my last words to him were the thought I couldn't get out of my head knowing the business was about to go down. Whether this is true or not, I really believed had Hogan told the truth on Arsenio Hall, none of this would have ever happened.

McMahon felt all of this happening at once couldn't have been coincidence, and it is quite amazing in hindsight to see all those lawsuits and charges come out at the same time, but seeing what has happened recently regarding the University of Colorado football program, or when political campaigns go into their final days, things tend to have an avalanche effect. He insisted at the time he would prove that Ted Turner was behind it, although there was nothing to his belief. As it turned out, Chatterton made an audiotape for Shults with a different story than she was telling, but then made a second tape with a stronger story.

Looking back some 12 years, Cole's story remains believable. He has done numerous interviews, and remains a fan today of wrestling even with his experiences with McMahon. Cole even wrote a long letter here when the death of Garvin brought this period back up, and more recently, was in a legal battle with the publishers of Bobby Heenan's book when Heenan told Cole's story wrong. Graham himself has admitted that he fabricated much of what he was saying (in particular, personal accusations against Patterson and McMahon that he admitted were outright lies), blaming it on drug issues he was going through. Court testimony more than two years later when McMahon was on trial did corroborate what Graham and Sammartino had said about steroid use in the company, and nobody these days denies the vast majority of the wrestlers in the 80s were on the juice. Graham and McMahon have not only made up, but McMahon is publishing his book and inducting him into his Hall of Fame in a few weeks. When Graham came to SummerSlam, his first time in a company dressing room in more than 14 years, most of the wrestlers treated him like baseball players would if Willie Mays showed up to meet players. They talked about watching him as kids, and many watched videos that Spike Dudley had brought for the big occasion. But others, most notably Jack Lanza and Patterson, did not forgive or forget. They hated the idea he was in the dressing room and being treated like a legend of the business. Shults never found a publisher for his book and no-showed Donahue and largely disappeared after legal threats from McMahon, only to return at a fan convention a few weeks ago. McMahon sued both Mushnick and Rivera to major publicity, but quietly dropped both lawsuits. Cole's relationship when he went back to work in the WWF was predictably rocky. To so many in the company, as business fell off, he was one of the people responsible for so much bad publicity. To

many, it probably didn't matter that he was likely telling the truth about an ugly situation and part of the business that never should have happened. He and his brother Lee had a falling out almost immediately after Tom went back to work for WWF. Lee switched sides for a second time, and went back to speaking about how things were in the WWF, and was mad that all the steroid publicity was getting in the way of what he thought was the real story. Tom Cole eventually felt the company was using him to get back at Mushnick, whom he greatly respected and always defended to other wrestling fans, even when that was a highly unpopular viewpoint. He has said of all the people he encountered during that period, on both sides, that Mushnick was the only one he thought was honest. Cole ended up gone fairly quickly from WWF, and there were plenty of incidents afterwards, such as his family once picketing Titan Towers to some local television publicity, and Linda McMahon personally attending his unemployment hearing, which is amazing for a CEO of a company to do with someone of his stature. When this was all going down, Linda claimed that while at one point she believed Tom's story, now she wasn't so sure. While privately he had reservations about Linda, in a letter to the Observer, he said nothing negative about her, thinking she was very different from Vince.

Mushnick and McMahon's situation lasted for years, with Mushnick writing many articles about WWF, pro wrestling, Turner and McMahon, none of which were positive. He became hated by wrestling fans, more for his articles that were on the money than for the ones that may not have been. For reasons unclear, Mushnick stopped paying attention to wrestling more than a year ago. Such stories that he would have written headlines about at another time, such as the death of Curt Hennig, or the death of Hulette and drug arrest of Luger, both right up his alley, he didn't even touch, even though he remains one of New York's leading sports columnists.

In the ring, Flair won the title at the Royal Rumble in Albany, which may still be the most memorable Rumble to date, starting at No. 3 and lasting 59:26 until the finish before a sellout 17,000 fans paying \$210,000 and another 225,000 PPV buys. Jack Tunney ruled that Flair would defend against Hogan at Wrestlemania. But that was an angle, and it ended up with Flair vs. Savage and Hogan vs. Justice at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis for Wrestlemania.

That show drew 62,167 fans, which was almost full, but it was heavily papered, with 47,000 paying \$1.25 million as the gate, and it did 300,000 PPV buys. Hogan, looking like he had aged quite a bit under the pressure, and clearly off steroids with a flat physique, bid farewell after being double-crossed on a finish. He was supposed to legdrop Justice, but to protect Justice, Harvey Whippleman, his manager, and later Papa Shango, would interfere. Whippleman didn't break up the pin, so Justice had to kick out of Hogan's legdrop, something that Hogan wouldn't have allowed to have been done. After Shango joined Justice in beating on Hogan, the person chosen to take his spot in the company looking to clean up its drug image, came out for the save. Of all people, it was the return of the Ultimate Warrior, whom McMahon had fired seven months earlier.

But in hindsight, you can probably point to the week of the Donahue show, or Hogan's farewell after that Wrestlemania, as the end of the first glory period of Vince

McMahon's Titan Sports. It was eight years since McMahon raided Hogan and Mean Gene Okerlund from Verne Gagne and Piper from Jim Crockett and they showed up on his television in St. Louis, and he started touring nationally, gobbling up a large percentage of the marketable talent. In the process, he had killed all but two of the previously existing strong regional network of promotions. Only the Turner-owned WCW, a huge money loser, which survived as a remnant of Crockett's company, and Jerry Jarrett's group in Memphis, operating on a shoestring budget and paying talent \$25 to \$40 per night, were still around. A third still existed on that day, Don Owen, whose family had run wrestling in Oregon for more than 60 years. But he was doomed a few months earlier when McMahon cut a deal with his sponsor and television station, causing the death of the Portland Wrestling television show. Just a few months after this, on a show that drew 80 fans, Owen announced his life in wrestling was over. McMahon, on the other hand, had changed wrestling, arguably more than any single person in its history. He both made it bigger than it had ever been, and in some ways, smaller than it had ever been. To this day people will argue whether he was the best thing for the industry, or the worst. He got it on NBC, made Hogan the biggest drawing card in the history of the industry and a legitimate cultural icon, and totally changed what people thought a pro wrestler was supposed to look like from chunky heavyweights to steroid freaks. Wrestlers made more money than ever before, but also more than ever before, wrestlers cracked under the pressure of the drug.; they had access to being stars, and felt they needed to look the way they needed, and to survive the brutal schedule. There were both the success stories and people who owe much of their success to him, and just as many of whose lives were marred, ruined, and some even ended prematurely. He had merchandised wrestlers like they were major television stars, and made them Saturday morning cartoon characters. He had presided over what had always been a sleazy business, and for the first time in decades, the public, in numerous national forums, found out just how sleazy it could be. And he and his company made the industry so much bigger financially than it ever could have been with the old-line promoters whose only concern was next Friday's house show gate. He was even partially responsible for PPV becoming a major part of the entertainment world.

Suddenly, it was falling apart. NBC was gone after the Gulf War angle. Hogan was done after the steroid scandal. The pressure to do real testing cost the WWF Justice, Warrior, The Legion of Doom (Hawk quit, while Animal ended up with a back injury), Von Erich, Snuka, Bulldog and others. He lost his top heel at the time, and most of his top babyfaces. The testing was real and the bodies got smaller. So did the house shows, dropping 40% by the end of the year. TV ratings fell faster than any period in history except during the collapse of WCW. Randy Savage was made champion at Wrestlemania, but his feud with Flair was dying at the gate, because they did the blow-off, where the face won the title, in the first meeting. The other main feud was Warrior vs. Papa Shango. Shango replaced Justice, who quit the company after a European tour, when he was told he was going to have to be suspended for a failed steroid test that actually took place a week before the Wrestlemania that he had main evented on. Shango was a cult favorite years later as The Godfather. The feud was based on Shango possessing supernatural voodoo powers. The angle was a laughing stock and didn't draw well. Shortly after it

ran its course, Warrior was fired because McMahon believed he was using Growth Hormone to best the tests.

The result was the darkest business period in company history. It was also the period that the company started gaining lot of overseas popularity, where nobody knew about all the problems.

But it was also the period the company started losing lots of money. While the "Monday Night War" DVD may talk about the creation of Nitro as the period where the WWF nearly went out of business from the losses, the reality is, it was Nitro and the War that saved an industry that had been on the ropes for several years. WCW only survived as programming for TBS. WWF really only survived because McMahon had made enough money during the good period to survive several bad years. But it got bad enough that the company had to take out loans to keep going at different points. There are a lot of what-ifs that can be asked historically about would the business exist and where would it be. Many ask about where things would be had McMahon never went national in 1984. The answer is that somebody else would have done it, and most likely, far less effectively. Cable television guaranteed the death of all but the most powerful of territories that could have the top talent and have the needed exposure. For whatever reason, few ask what would have happened had Ted Turner not asked Eric Bischoff in 1995 why, since he had Hogan, Savage and Flair, his ratings were below that of WWF's on the USA Network. When Bischoff said, it's because McMahon's show aired Monday night in prime time. Turner responded, "Well, then why don't you do a show Monday night in prime time?" If Turner had not made those flippant remarks, and had Bischoff taken a conservative squash match approach to Nitro instead of doing a weekly combative mega show approach, forcing Raw to upgrade as well, it is very likely that wrestling would be a far less lucrative and popular industry today, if it even would continue to exist at a major league level with all the losses the big two were incurring.

While they were hardly the only two major stars over the next four years, most remember this next period of WWF history as one where two mid-card tag team wrestlers during the boom period were thrust to the top. They were two of the company's best workers in its history, but during the steroid era, were too small to have even been considered for the world title slot. The two were good friends and great opponents. They'd talk frequently about not getting pushed even though they were better in the ring than all but a few on the roster, and recognized their roles of making far inferior talent look passable to the public. And they said if they got to the top, all the backbiting and political bullshit that they saw when they were in the middle and being kept down, they'd learn from, and that aspect of the business would improve. And thus began the era of Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels.